News



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Siller is founder, chairman and CEO of the Tunnel to Towers Foundation, established by his family to honor the sacrifice of their youngest sibling, Stephen.

A firefighter with the Fire Department of the City of New York, Stephen Siller died while trying to save lives at the World Trade Center. Two of four planes hijacked by terrorists on the morning of Sept. 11 destroyed the twin towers. The third smashed into the Pentagon in Washington and the fourth went down in a field near Shanksville, Pennsylvania, after passengers on the Washington-bound plane thwarted the hijackers.

Nearly 3,000 people were killed in the attacks; more than 6,000 were injured, and thousands more suffered long-term, sometimes-fatal health consequences.

The foundation is a reflection of the Siller siblings' Catholic faith and the example of their late parents, George and Mae, who were secular Franciscans. Siller said his parents demonstrated and taught Franciscan values of "service, sacrifice and doing good."

When Stephen died, "we made a decision early on not to let evil triumph," Frank Siller told OSV News. "We had learned from our parents not to lay down and say, 'Woe is me,' but to accept things for what they were and decide to do good instead

of feeling sorry for ourselves. When you do good, you feel better."

The good is manifested in generosity to injured first responders and veterans and care for the families of those who have died. The foundation helps spouses and children of firefighters and police officers killed in the line of duty, or as a result of 9/11-related illnesses, often paying off a remaining mortgage. It provides mortgage-free homes to Gold Star families with young children of military personnel who died in the line of duty.

Its "Smart Homes" program constructs custom, specially adapted homes for catastrophically injured service members.

In recent years, with fewer service members deployed to overseas wars, Siller said there has been an increased focus on helping homeless veterans. "The government says there are 40,000 homeless veterans, but I think there are many more than that," Siller said.

"But our goal is to eradicate homelessness in veterans," he said.

The foundation's ambitious program entails the development of "veteran villages," which are largely existing buildings converted to an average of 150 apartments each.

"We don't want them to be shelters, just a roof overhead. These are villages with rec centers and wrap-around services to help homeless vets get better and be a part of society," Siller said. Services are supplied by small not-for-profit organizations.

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Siller said the program provided homes for 5,000 previously homeless veterans last year and will serve 6,500 more men and women this year in cities across the country. He predicted the foundation will place 10,000 homeless veterans in its "villages" in 2025.

From modest beginnings in December 2001, the foundation has grown exponentially. It reported over $474 million in revenue and support in 2022. Its signature annual event, a late September 5K Tunnel to Towers walk and run from Brooklyn to Manhattan, drew 1,500 participants in 2002. Already, almost 40,000 are

registered for the 2024 event, according to Siller. The run takes place Sept. 29.

"The run is a reflection of our commitment to honor and never forget the sacrifices of the first responders. So many participants, volunteers and donors have joined us and so many have had their own acts of heroism and courage," Siller said.

Some of the participants have been coming for years, he said, and some of the ones who started out as youths now bring their own children. "We need new people along the way to spread our message," Siller said.

The message-spreading includes an online K-12 age-appropriate educational curriculum and a 83-foot-long tractor-drawn trailer that travels the country with a 9/11 exhibit.

The foundation got its name from Stephen Siller's path on 9/11. He was off-duty that day, but suited up to help when the emergency calls came. Finding the Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel under the East River closed to vehicular traffic, he ran through the tunnel to lower Manhattan with his 60 pounds of FDNY turn-out gear. He left behind his wife, Sarah, five children and the six older siblings who cared for him after their parents died when he was a young child.

Frank Siller, volunteer CEO of a huge charity, said he can be found most Sundays at the 8 a.m. Mass at Blessed Sacrament, his lifelong parish in the Staten Island borough of New York.

Thinking about the impact and continued expansion of the Tunnel to Towers Foundation, he quoted St. Francis, "'While we have time, let us do good.'" He added with a chuckle, "I'm 71. I'm running out of time."

The annual run now includes more than 1,000 specific teams, each running in honor or memory of someone.

"That's the beauty of the foundation," Siller said. "We bring people together. My buddy St. Francis would be happy about this."