



# A tribute in roses

Carol O'Neill's Huntington Bay garden honors members of the Sandler O'Neill firm who lost their lives Sept. 11, 2001



NEWSDAY PHOTO / KEN SPENCER

Carol O'Neill, creator of the memorial garden

**G**ray clouds move across the sky, the sun coming and going between them. The wind picks up, and the rainstorm that has been predicted hovers in the air. But it never comes. The only moisture is the hint of tears gathering in Carol O'Neill's eyes as she walks in her rose garden and remembers the lost.

The roses grow in two boxwood-bordered beds, each about 45 feet long and 11 feet wide. They are divided by a path of Kelly green grass and look like tall towers. "I didn't think about that, the towers, until I saw the beds," Carol says. Her husband, Thomas O'Neill is a founding partner in the investment banking firm of Sandler O'Neill & Partners, which was located on the 104th

floor of Two World Trade Center when the Twin Towers fell on Sept. 11, 2001.

The attack took the lives of 66 employees and four visitors who were in the firm's offices that morning. People woven into the fabric of Carol O'Neill's life, people she knew and a few she never met. In the following weeks, Carol put on her black knit suit, and she and her husband — who was on a business trip on Sept. 11 — went to funeral after funeral. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," she said over and over again to the bereaved at the more than 30 services she attended. She wanted to do something that spoke to the heart more than words. "What can I do?" she kept thinking. "What can I do?"

Carol is a blond woman in her 50s with very blue eyes and a manner that invites confidences. By her own definition, she is not religious but

she is what she calls spiritual — her church is in her garden and her own soul. Two days after gray dust spread across the earth surrounding the fallen towers, the idea of a memorial rose garden came to her. At first, it was tentative, like a seedling bending in the wind. "I remember being afraid — of somehow offending someone, of my intentions not being understood, of it seeming insignificant.

"But then I thought, a garden is life, a garden is beauty, when you have flowers it's like you can believe in God."

And so she planted a rose garden. The O'Neills' elegant gray house with black shutters sits on 2½ acres and includes a swimming pool and a large porch that looks out on Huntington Bay. It is a lifestyle away from the home in Brentwood where Carol grew up and the projects in Astoria where she lived before that.



IRENE VIRAG

After they moved in nine years ago, the O'Neills dug up the tennis court on the front of their property and put in a lawn. Tom is a habitual golfer and Carol — a former social worker who looked across a room at Suffolk Community College in her undergraduate days and saw a smiling young man and told her friends "I'm going to marry that guy" and did — spends much of her time gardening and sewing and finding joy in her family, which includes three grown daughters and two grandsons. The couple decided to plant the new garden in the wide expanse of lawn along the hawthorn-lined cobblestone driveway where



PHOTO BY WES FREDSELL

**Carol O'Neill's memorial rose garden is at the Huntington Bay home she shares with her husband, Thomas O'Neill, a founding partner in Sandler O'Neill & Partners, which lost 66 employees on 9/11.**

the tennis court once was.

Last spring, the heavily amended and composted earth came alive with 70 rose bushes — their fragrance mixing with the scent of the nearby sea. There are 12 varieties and all are David Austin English roses, which are bred from old roses, floribundas and hybrid teas and flower through the season. Like soft-pink Kathryn Morley with cup-shaped blooms and light-red Sophy's Rose with rosette-shaped flowers. And white Glamis Castle with a dainty appearance that belies its bushy and free-flowering nature. Or William Shakespeare, a rose that starts life in velvety crimson and gradually turns a

rich purple. All are at their best in June when, Carol says, "the fragrance is unbelievable."

Each rosebush has a lovely silver tag with a name engraved on it. "Not the name of a person but the name of a rose," Carol explains as she bends to remove a yellowing leaf from a plant. "I could never come out here otherwise — it would be too overwhelming. What if something happened to the rosebush?"

It makes sense that all the roses in the O'Neill front lawn are for all of them — for the people who once filled her husband's daily life.

In different ways and at different times, as she walks and works in the garden, Carol loses herself in the flowers and the fragrance and in thoughts of the lost.

"Every time, it's a different memory, a different person. Sometimes, it's just a certain smile, a laugh, a gesture. The other day, Timmy Byrne popped into my head — what a funny, generous guy."

She sees Timothy Byrne, who played football for Syracuse University and took over his mother's mortgage and helped pay a brother's college tuition. Who was last heard from when he called his mother and brother in Huntington to tell them he had just seen a plane crash into Tower One.

She sees her nephew, Peter O'Neill Jr., who called his parents in Amityville twice after the first plane hit to tell them not to worry. He was 21 and he had started at Sandler O'Neill just a month and a half before the attack. "I can still see Peter sitting on the stoop of my mother-in-law's house the week before 9/11," his aunt says. "He had this far-off expression, just staring off — I don't know — into space, into the future. He had such a serene look on his face."

She remembers her husband's secretary, Christina Donovan-Flannery, who was "like a fourth daughter. Her husband was devastated. They got married in May." A wedding photo of Christine sits on a shelf in the O'Neills' den. She has dark hair and eyes, and she smiles as if only good things are waiting.

For Carol O'Neill, they all live among the roses. Chris Quackenbush and Herman Sandler, founding partners like her husband. And Kristy Irvine-Ryan, her oldest daughter Meredith's best friend from childhood. Meredith was teaching kindergarten in Harlem. The two young women, along with another friend, Louise Rexer, had started a charity called Secret Smiles that helps needy families.

"I think my daughter and Kristy's husband, Brendan, have put their grief into this charity," Carol says.

Kristy was to be matron of honor at Meredith's wedding that October. Instead, Meredith gave the eulogy at Kristy's funeral. "Where did she get the strength?" Carol asks. "My husband spoke at some of the funerals; it was so hard for him. He loved these people. Where did he get the strength?"

Tom was on a business trip in Oregon on Sept. 11, 2001. Carol was on the phone with him when the second plane hit Tower Two. "I think about what if Tom had been there that day —

but I can't go there. I don't let myself go there.

Wives and children gave eulogies. Where did that strength come from?"

She is writing notes to all the families and inviting them to visit the garden — the place where she glimpses their husbands and wives and sons and daughters and fathers and mothers.

The path between the rectangular rose beds that resemble twin towers leads to a turn-of-the-century bronze fountain. A plaque engraved with a Native American prayer lies in front of the fountain. Carol found the prayer years ago. It is about life remembered. The last three lines are, perhaps, the most beautiful.

*"I am the soft stars that shine at night.*

*Do not think of me as gone — I am with you still — in each new dawn"*

And in the roses that grow in Carol O'Neill's garden.



NEWSDAY PHOTOS / KEN SPENCER

**The rose garden — formerly a tennis court that Carol O'Neill had dug up — was created with help from designer Cindy Klein from Landgarden in Manhattan and Main Street Nursery in Huntington. It features 70 rose bushes and 12 varieties of David Austin English roses. Above, a bronze fountain and a plaque engraved with a Native American prayer accent the grounds.**



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