

## Families infuriated by ‘crass commercialism’ of 9/11 Museum gift shop

By Abby Phillip

*[This post has been updated.]*

Mugs, T-shirts, scarves and other souvenirs have triggered controversy at the National September 11 Memorial Museum, which holds unidentified remains of some of the victims of the 9/11 terrorist attacks — as well as a gift shop.

It isn't unusual for museums that commemorate tragedy to have gift shops, which help cover operational costs. There's one at the USS Arizona Memorial at Pearl Harbor, and another at the Oklahoma City National Memorial & Museum.

But Ground Zero?

“It's crass commercialism on a literally sacred site,” Kurt Horning, whose son Matthew died on 9/11, said in a telephone interview Monday. “It's a burial ground. We don't think there should be those things offered on that spot.

“If you want to do it, do it someplace else — but not right there.”

The New York Post was the first to wonder about the wisdom of selling souvenirs at the site [in a Sunday story](#). The tabloid's cover headline: “Little shop of horror.”

Nearly 3,000 people were killed at the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001. During [last week's dedication](#), President Obama called the site of the memorial and museum “this sacred place.”

The museum will open to the public Wednesday, but families of 9/11 victims, along with rescue and recovery workers, were able to visit the facility last week for a preview — during which the gift shop was open for business.

“They're down there selling bracelets; they're making money off my dead son,” said Jim Riches, whose firefighter son, Jimmy, died at the World Trade Center on 9/11.

Riches, speaking by phone Monday, added: “I won't go down there as long as those body parts are in the museum.”

Some of the items for sale in the gift shop are clearly intended to tap into the sense of solidarity that emerged in New York following the attacks, like the plain black T-shirts with the tagline “honor, remember, reunite.” But others, like a black hoodie with the twin towers emblazoned on the front, seem more of a vivid and painful reminder of what was lost. And some pieces of New York City Fire Department memorabilia — including a doggie vest and toy truck — seem kitschy or trivial.

In a written statement, Michael Frazier, the nonprofit 9/11 museum's senior vice president of communications and digital media, said the items sold at the gift shop were “carefully selected.”

“To care for the Memorial and Museum, our organization relies on private fundraising, gracious donations and revenue from ticketing and carefully selected keepsake items for retail,” Frazier said. “The museum store is open during this free dedication period when guests include 9/11 family members, rescuers, recovery workers, survivors and the residents of the local community.”

“In fact, many of our guests from the 9/11 community have visited the shop and purchased a keepsake from their historic experience,” he wrote.

The 9/11 museum isn't the only memorial to tragedy or death to include a gift shop.

Arlington National Cemetery has a small bookstore that sells items including lapel pins, magnets and T-shirts to commemorate the Tomb of the Unknowns. At the Pearl Harbor memorial in Hawaii, the non-profit Pacific Historic Parks operates a gift shop whose proceeds pay for programming.

The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington also has a museum shop, which is stocked with a range of items including books, “Never Again” patches, menorahs and World War II posters.

Bringing home an item from the Holocaust Museum gift store “continues to tell the story you just experienced,” Blossom Zell said Monday afternoon. Zell, who said her father was a Holocaust survivor, had just picked up two dashboard mezuzahs — scrolls traditionally attached to the

doors of Jewish homes — from the crowded museum gift shop. “This was so far in the past. You want to make it real.”

When the museum opened in 1993, items for the gift store were selected with an intense degree of sensitivity, said Ruth B. Mandel, who served as vice chair of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council for a dozen years. “Books and other historically relevant materials and that sort of thing — that was never controversial,” she said Monday. “It’s just when it turned into souvenir kinds of things, the people who make these decisions on the board and the staffs have to have special antenna and sensitivities for what is appropriate and tasteful.”

Mandel was speaking specifically about the Holocaust Museum; she declined to comment on the 9/11 Memorial Museum’s commerce controversy.

Officials at the New York museum had already frustrated some 9/11 relatives.

Kurt and Diane Horning were founders of the WTC Families for Proper Burial, which [sued New York City](#) for the right to bury remains that were in the material and debris from the World Trade Center site; from the beginning, they and other 9/11 families objected to the remains being used as a “[programmatically element](#)” at a tourist attraction.

Other family members [petitioned](#) and [protested](#) against the decision to make those remains a part of a repository at the museum — even though the area would be closed to the public, and the museum will remain free to all 9/11 relatives.

Kurt Horning suggested that the shock factor of including those remains was more important than respect for the wishes of 9/11 families.

“They’re using it basically like a Ringling Brothers sideshow attraction,” Horning said Monday. “We were dismayed about that.

“The gift shop and cafe issue is that they are actually in the museum — on the site. When they decided to build it on the site where these some 3,000 people died, it behooved them to change the standard for how a museum is going to be exhibited.”

Horning attended the preview but said his wife, Diane, refused because of the decision to open the gift shop — along with a cafe — at the site.

Of course, it’s nearly impossible to walk a block in New York City without encountering merchandise for sale — and 9/11 commemorative items have been a part of the city for years. T-shirts and other wearable apparel are a big part of first-responder culture, according to Noam Freedman, owner of the New York Firestore in lower Manhattan, which has sold commemorative 9/11 material since the 2001 attacks.

“It’s the nature of the field,” Freedman said. “First responders wear T-shirts. It makes sense that clothing would be part of the commemoration.”

When Freedman’s store reopened near the end of September 2001, the Firestore stocked its first commemorative 9/11 T-shirt.

“They all started showing up at the store asking for shirts and they wanted a memorial shirt,” Freedman said. “They wanted to put something on that commemorated what took place.

“That was the only thing we sold for a while.”

The Firestore has [donated more than \\$250,000](#) to 9/11 charities from the proceeds of its sales.

More than 12 years later, Freedman is sympathetic to the struggle that the memorial’s organizers face, given the sensitivity of the subject. But his store is proof that the demand for items that commemorate 9/11 is still strong.

“You try to offer something that will appeal to the sensitivities of a broad range of people,” Freedman said. “There’s no way to decide one way or another what’s right and what’s wrong.”

*A previous version of this story incorrectly identified the National September 11 Memorial Museum as the National September 11 Memorial Hall and Museum.*