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Unwavering Patriotism

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TAMPA - A downpour sent thousands scurrying for shelter Wednesday morning but didn't destroy the spirit of men, women and children taking part in Flags Along the Bayshore: Tampa Remembers 9-11.

An estimated 15,000 people - many dressed in patriotic colors - lined Tampa's premier boulevard in an event intended to memorialize those who died in last year's terrorist attacks and to honor the military. The Tampa Tribune, TBO.com, and WFLA, News Channel 8, were sponsors.

The 90-minute program had been carefully planned, with speeches, prayers, music, military flyovers and comments from Tampa Mayor Dick Greco, Gov. Jeb Bush and Gen. Tommy Franks.

The deluge threw things off, forcing a delay.

Bush couldn't stay because of scheduling conflicts. Music was cut. Flyovers by F-15s and B-1 bombers - that had been timed with the program in mind - were out of sync.

Thousands left when the rain was at its heaviest, but thousands of others stood their ground, waiting for the program to resume.

Margot Dyals of Davis Islands hid under a table for shelter.

``I think our country has been through a lot worse than this rainstorm," she said. ``It's the least I can do to show my support."

Residents of upscale homes even offered towels to rain-soaked flag wavers.

A handful of drenched and shirtless Durant High School seniors climbed on benches and chanted: ``U.S.A.! U.S.A.!"

``It doesn't matter that we're freezing, because we've got American pride," said senior Diego Cuenca, 17. ``We weren't gonna take a break because those New York firefighters didn't take breaks."

Warned in advance about possible crowds and traffic problems, flag wavers arrived well before dawn. Many drove long distances to be at the

memorial.

Jonea and Richard Boyer of Brandon were there at 4 a.m. to secure a good spot.

Jaye DeLago, an assistant manager at McDonald's, left her Holiday home at 3:45 a.m. for the tribute.

The 58-year-old was bracing herself for an emotional event. ``I'm going to have to make sure I have lots of tissues," DeLago said. ``I'm a crier."

Davene Hatfield, 44, and her friends Sam Hiers, 45, and Tony Barker, 40, rode from Rocky Creek on their Harley- Davidson motorcycles.

The anniversary of the terrorist attacks ``makes you remember what you were doing when it happened," said Hatfield, a bartender at Pit Stop Pub on Hillsborough Avenue.

A year ago, Hatfield and Hiers heard the news on the radio, then turned on the television to see the second plane hit the tower.

``That afternoon I didn't think any one of us was going to make it," Hiers said. ``I thought, `This is the beginning of the end.' "

Jakey Jenkins, 24, wearing an Uncle Sam suit and stovepipe hat, smiled and waved from his wheelchair at Bayshore Boulevard and Howard Avenue.

Jenkins has cerebral palsy and lives with his father, Paul, of Madeira Beach.

``He was so excited he could hardly sleep last night," Paul Jenkins said.

Security was tight. Roughly 150 law enforcement officers from the Tampa Police Department and other agencies were there.

The kilt-clad Berkeley Preparatory School Pipe and Drum Corps and the tuxedo- and gown-wearing Tampa Oratorio Singers had their bags searched before getting onstage.

No arrests were made, and traffic ran smoother than expected, Tampa police Capt. Hugh Miller said.

Harry Torgersen, who lives on Bayshore, didn't view the event as an imposition.

``It's a drop of inconvenience compared to the ocean of sacrifices that this day represents," Torgersen said.

The show of patriotism - which began with the vision of the Bayshore Patriots, a k a Julie Whitney, Linda Alfonso, Julie Sargent and Bill Hamblin - impressed Bush.

``I don't think I've seen as many flags in one place anywhere," he said.

Greco, who made the tribute Tampa's signature event, noted: ``It just goes to show you what a handful of people who get together and stick with

something can do."

Franks told the crowd, ``I remember almost a year ago driving this street seeing these wonderful Americans, patriots of Bayshore, standing out here just so we could all be reminded that America remembers.

``This is a time to remember. It's a time to reflect. It's a time to be proud."

Organizers were disappointed by the rain but thrilled by the turnout and the crowd's resilience.

``I'll paraphrase what my wife said: `Thank God, one year later we're running from rain and not from falling buildings,' " Bayshore Patriot Hamblin said.

Reporters Karla Jackson, Donna Koehn, Karen Haymon Long and Keith Morelli contributed to this report. B.C. Manion can be reached at (813) 259-7150.

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