

Retreat helps heal wounds from WTC

65 people attend event to talk about life after Sept. 11

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PUTNAM VALLEY — The day after her fifth birthday, Montana Cortez watched the news in horror, knowing her uncle was in the World Trade Center as it was being destroyed by airliners.

"He used to always tell her how strong she was," said her mother, Doreen Cortez of Newburgh. "When we saw it on TV ... she said, 'I'm strong, and I have muscles. I could lift those rocks and get him out.'"

Montana never got the chance to save Michael Trinidad, who worked for Cantor Fitzgerald, or to see him again. She had nightmares and pulled some of her hair out, her mother said, adding that the symptoms subsided when her family visited Ground Zero.

Over the weekend, her family participated in another event to help them heal and move forward. They were among 65 people to attend a retreat of cultural activities and talk about their struggles and gains since the terrorist attack.

The retreat, at the Catholic Youth Organization camp in Putnam Valley, is part of a series of programs for families affected by Sept. 11, 2001. The retreats and a summer camp, sponsored by Lions Clubs International, are a collaboration between the Li-

ons Clubs, the White Plains-based Friendship Ambassadors Foundation and the Catholic Youth Organization, with counselors trained by Westchester Jewish Community Services.

This retreat is "so that families can be together outside of the stress of the holidays, especially with a loved one lost," said Patrick Sciarratta, executive director of Friendship Ambassadors, which uses the arts and cultural exchange to help victims of war here and abroad.

Please see RETREAT, 2A

Retreat helps heal 9/11 wounds

RETREAT, from 1A

Yesterday children clustered around Bill DiBenedetto, a carpenter from Briarcliff Manor who practices Native American traditions. DiBenedetto showed them how to make "prayer ties" out of small cotton swatches filled with tobacco he grows. Later, they made wishes and tossed the ties into the fireplace.

"Make your wish!" Montana shouted, showing her red prayer tie to anyone who would look. "I wish I was a ballerina."

Her sister, 10-year-old Breanna, said she wished their uncle would come back — in a dream.

"You just close your eyes, and whatever you dream, you can have," she said.

Bobby Taveras, a 13-year-old from the Bronx, said that sharing wishes helped him learn more about his peers.

"Many people have, kind of like, bad pasts. We all have something to worry about, someone to care for," said Bobby, whose father died around Sept. 11, 2001, from an unrelated cause.

His mother, Millie Mata, said she stayed in her room during some sessions because she is still overwhelmed by her memories, having emerged from the subway just after the second plane hit.

"I would like to erase those pictures, but they just flash back and flash back," she said. For her, the workshop helped just by getting her out of the city.

"We wouldn't have been able to



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Montana Cortez casts her wishes and prayers into the fire in hopes that the smoke created will travel around the world during a retreat for families of 9/11 victims in Putnam Valley.

afford a holiday getaway," said April Lawrence of Staten Island, a single mother who came with her three daughters. Until recently, she had been unemployed because her Wall Street office never reopened following the attack.

As the weekend drew to a close, participants wrote their wishes on paper while DiBenedetto pounded his mallet onto an elk-skin drum and sang in a booming voice about "You, me and the Creator."

Then he urged participants to cast their wishes into the flames.

"The smoke carries them throughout the world and to the Creator," he said.

A few people read theirs aloud.

"I wish that my mother wasn't allergic to cats," said Crystal Lawrence, 7, from Staten Island. "I wish that my grandmother was better. I wish everybody was happy."

William Johns, a 12-year-old from Brooklyn whose father escaped from the 70th floor, made his wish for those less fortunate.

"I wish all the people who were affected by 9/11 would one day try to overcome their anger and get better," he said.

That's exactly what the retreat did for Alberto Leon, a Mexican immigrant who worked as a line cook a block away from the towers.

"I was getting really angry with everybody," said Leon, who had struggled to find a job to support his three children when the restaurant went out of business after the collapse. He said many prospective employers tried to take advantage of the fact that he didn't have a green card at that time by offering him substandard wages.

"Here I found out there's a lot of nice people. Not everybody's bad," he told a fellow participant. "The only thing you have to do is open your heart."

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