

Tribute tells whole truth in Bronx

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No work of art in the city is more compelling than the one incorporated into the exterior wall of the Bronx firehouse where what seems at worst raunchy misbehavior is being called a sex scandal.

The work is rightly titled "Honor 2000." It was conceived by the artist Mierle Ukeles before the attack on the World Trade Center prompted all the planet's media to extol the bravery of our firefighters. The piece remains a reminder of that bravery now the media have taken to knocking the firefighters off the very pedestal we put them on.

As the newest scandal story had TV news crews filming the quarters of Engine 75, Ladder 33 on Friday, anyone who so desired could step to the side of the firehouse and contemplate "Honor 2000."

The piece employs the pattern of the bricks to depict a truck that is twin to the actual one that is based inside. The storage compartments consist of glass bricks inscribed with the names of all 75 Bronx firefighters who died in the line of duty before 2000.

Two of these men perished on a Christmas Day, Firefighter Joseph Finger of Ladder 29 in 1906 and Capt. Vincent McGill in 1955. Six died in a single day, when a parapet wall collapsed on April 4, 1956.

Among the more recent names is that of Capt. James McDonnell. He was leading the way into fire on Oct. 20, 1985, when he sensed imminent danger. Rather than save himself, he pushed two firefighters to safety.

"Get out!" McDonnell shouted.

Those became his last words as he was engulfed by a fireball. The two firefighters survived, only for one of them, Peter Bielfeld, to die at the Trade Center. Bielfeld was at the medical division in Brooklyn that day and dashed across the bridge after the first plane hit. He grabbed a turnout coat

from the firehouse across from the south tower, leaving a note: "I'm borrowing this gear. Hope to return it. If I don't come back...."

Another who died on 9/11 was Battalion Chief Dennis Devlin, without whom the artist Ukeles could never have made "Honor 2000" more than a concept. Devlin took it upon himself to guide her through the department's bureaucracy, attending meeting after meeting. He kept her spirits up in the way of any great fire officer, urging her on with a power greater than simple rank.

"His face was like the sunshine," Ukeles said on Friday. "When you were around him, you felt you could do anything, you could accomplish anything."

Devlin took particular care to ensure the details on the memorial glass bricks were correct. Nobody imagined that these would be the last Bronx firefighters to die, and Ukeles left 14 of the bricks blank.

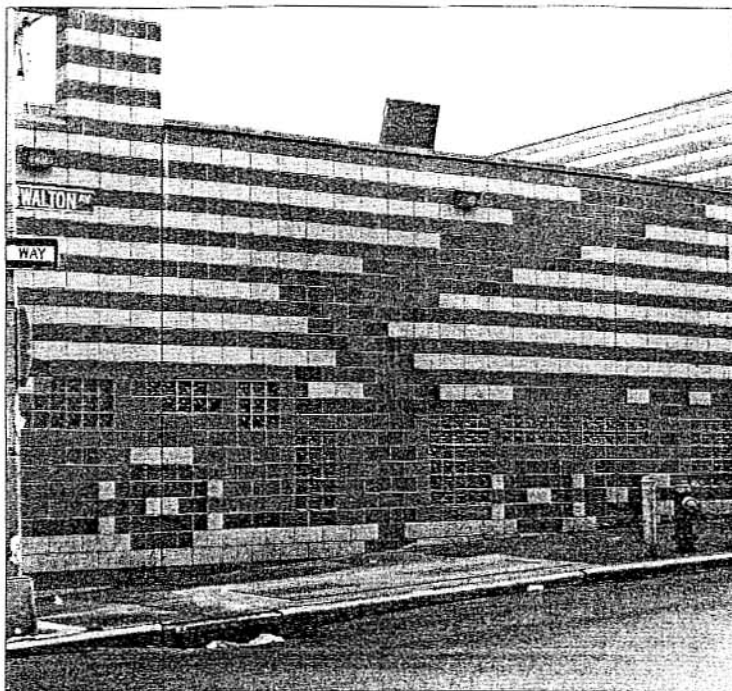
"I didn't want to leave too many," she said.

In place of the FDNY logo on the driver's side door, Ukeles put a glass carving of the hands of two people the firefighters had rescued in 1999: 3-year-old Danae Ruiz and her father, Virgilio.

"As if their hands are blessing the truck," Ukeles said.

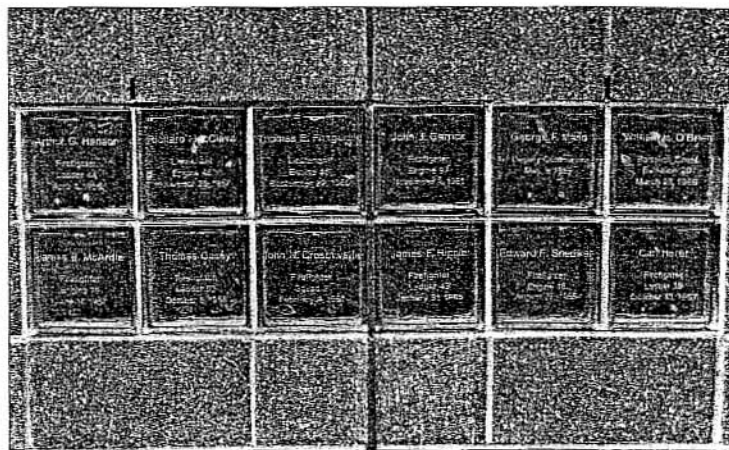
Danae and her father attended the formal opening of the new firehouse in the summer of 2000, and she received a big hug from the firefighter who had saved her, Lt. John Halpin of Ladder 33. Halpin had removed his face mask so he could administer oxygen to the unconscious girl as he carried her through the choking smoke and flames.

At the ribbon cutting, offici-



MATHEW ROBERTS

Firehouse on Walton Ave. in Morris Heights, the Bronx, where moving work of art called "Honor 2000" is part of side wall. Below, dozen of the 75 bravest names etched into tribute.



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als noted that between them Engine 75 and Ladder 33 had been awarded 50 citations and 30 medals for uncommon valor. Fire Department chaplain Mychal Judge blessed the new quarters and then stepped around to the side wall.

"He blessed my truck also," Ukeles recalled.

The glass hands remained in perpetual blessing after Judge and Devlin and 341 other members of the department per-

ished at the World Trade Center 13 months later. Ukeles remains too brokenhearted to add Devlin's name to "Honor 2000" and those 14 glass bricks remain blank.

The firefighters put a shoulder patch along with pictures of Devlin and two other 9/11 comrades in a window at the front of the firehouse. The media mob that gathered on Friday took note that the shoulder patch bore the firehouse nick-

name, Animal House.

"Is that irony?" a TV reporter asked.

After the media departed, the chief whose face was like sunshine continued to smile from behind the window glass. The artwork that is part of his legacy was on the side wall with its glass hands in perpetual blessing of what firefighters are, whether or not a scant few sometimes act otherwise.

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