

■ BY MITCHELL KRUGEL

Magnified on a screen spreading nearly 50 feet wide, Port Authority PD Superintendent Edward Cetnar delivered a message that reverberated through this 9/11. In the theater at the National Law Enforcement Museum in Washington, D.C. — across the street from those hallowed Memorial walls — Cetnar helped elevate this larger-than-life moment.

Except that on this 9/11, nothing was larger than life.

The National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial inaugurated its first-ever 9/11 ceremony and reception. The event provided an opportunity for a roll call of heroes — the 536 law enforcement officers whose names have been inscribed on the Memorial walls for being lost in the line of duty related to 9/11. There were 72 on Sept. 11, 2001. There have been 464 added since then. And counting.

The hundreds who attended this solemn ceremony knew that those numbers likely could be double, even triple, if not for Dr. Iris Udasin. The



medical marvel behind the World Trade Center (WTC) Health Program at the Rutgers University Environmental and Occupational Health Sciences Institute (EO-HSI), Dr. Udasin had not yet made it to the part of the ceremony following the roll call when Cetnar and others offered their recognition of her work and celebration of her presence.

When the names were all read, she chatted with some friends, including one of her WTC patients, NJSPBA Special Projects Coordinator John Hulse, and PBA President Pete Andreyev. She went

through the names on a sheet of paper with the reverence of reviewing a class list of former students. When seeing pictures of officers on the wall of the Police Unity Tour room in the museum, Dr. Udasin pointed to ones she knew and started telling stories.

This is a special 9/11-related world Dr. Udasin has created, one made larger because of lives she has saved. And that was the focus of the tribute from the big screen and beyond when at the first-ever 9/11 ceremony at the Memorial, they bestowed the first-ever Service Above Self Award to Dr. Iris Udasin.

More than 20 years after Sept. 11, 2001, there are an estimated 400,000 people who were exposed to deadly toxins and carcinogens at the WTC site. Thousands of them see Dr. Udasin annually or more frequently through the WTC Health Program. Cetnar was one. Following him on the big screen, NJ State Police Colonel Partick Callahan concluded his tribute to how Dr. Udasin has helped so many of his officers by saying, “Service above self. That’s you, doc.”

Honored, overwhelmed and with her husband, Gary, by her side afterward, Dr. Udasin fought back a tear and mustered enough voice to share some words. For this 9/11, the conversation cherished life and the heroes. And what she has done to serve that.

“No, that’s what I do. I try to keep people off of the wall if I can,” Dr. Udasin confirmed. “In this crazy world, at least I have a purpose.”

Call to service

As a doctor of internal medicine, Dr. Udasin built expertise in organizing clinical response by getting employee health started for the medical school at Robert Wood Johnson. When she started seeing a few patients at EOSHI who were there on 9/11, the school procured funding for what would become the WTC Health Program.

At first, Dr. Udasin saw patients who had responded on 9/11 and the days and months following who were experiencing asthma and upper respiratory discomfort. Then, it became treating more chronic illnesses when she developed an understanding of what had to be done for this growing population.

“In the beginning, it was about getting these guys to take care of themselves, to go for their sleep studies, chest X-rays and colonoscopies. And it’s still about that,” she explained. “But I remember one of my patients said to me, ‘I can go into a dark alley and get rid of a bad guy, but the idea

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From left, Jon Adler, president of the National Law Enforcement Officers Foundation, Dr. Iris Udasin, Police Unity Tour Founder Pat Montuore and Bill Alexander, National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Executive Director.

of a colonoscopy or an MRI, I can't handle that.' So I spent hours talking to people, saying whatever I think I can say to get them to go for the tests that they need."

She has her heroes who she wanted to honor on this 9/11 rather than stepping into the spotlight. One of the names read during the roll call was a patient who she tried to get to go for a CAT scan. Unfortunately, not in time. Another who she helped survive until COVID got him would send her jokes during the pandemic to make her laugh while she was keeping the clinic open at some risk to her own health.

"We got him through his cancer, but he was only worried about me during COVID," Dr. Udasin recalled. "Talk about random acts of kindness."

She honored her good friend State Trooper William Fearon, who died in 2016 of 9/11-related brain cancer from responding the day of the attack. Dr. Udasin wanted everybody to know how these were real heroes, like Bill, who used to dress up as Batman when going for his chemotherapy so he could stop by and entertain kids in the hospital.

"These are the people that we worked to help every day," she emphasized. "And I still work to take care of you women and men."

At your service

Dr. Udasin has become renowned for knowing all her patients like they are family. Hulse related how when he goes for his annual checkup, Dr. Udasin not only knows all the facts of his case, but also of his love for trains and how he shares that with his grandson, Johnny.

The doc confided that she does keep notes on patients' charts. But that only amplifies her caring about service above self.

From his experiences, Hulse wanted to commemorate Dr. Udasin by imploring all first responders who were at the WTC site in those days and weeks to not ignore deadline after deadline for getting their paperwork filed and getting into the WTC Health Program. Because of his connection, he gets the calls that come into the PBA office from members that are often a month after the deadline, asking what they can do to get help.

There's no doubt that Dr. Udasin would endorse this public service announcement from Hulse.

"I'm not going to speak for her, but I would think it's probably her life's work. It's so important what she does," he began. "You don't go and register as a sign of weakness. It's for you and your family to make sure that you're protected. There's a time bomb inside every one of us. Some will never go off, but when they do, you need the help that they provide."

Her many patients know how dedicated Dr. Udasin is, often having Gary hold dinner because she wants to stay late at work and make sure to deliver all test results to patients that came in that day. And when her patients do get sick, she is focused on getting them mental health treatment to go with treatment of their illnesses.

"I want to make sure people are doing the right thing and they feel like they've done everything to take care of themselves," she added. "I'm really proud of the fact that we've actually really given our patients enough time to figure out what's going on with them."

Into service

Prior to the roll call of fallen 9/11 heroes, Alita Montuore, wife of Police Unity Tour founder Pat Montuore, who helped inspire this event, provided



a musical interlude to honor the occasion. Her rendition of the song “Jealous of the Angels” certainly created an emotional crescendo.

But the opening line, “Another angel seated around the throne tonight,” well, it could have easily been dedicated to Dr. Udasin on this day.

Montuore noted in his keynote address prior to the roll call, “There are people out there that care more for us than we even care for ourselves.” That was dedicated to Dr. Udasin.

Jon Adler, president of the Federal Law Enforcement Officers Foundation, who combined with Montuore to conceive the ceremony, had his own poetic praise for Dr. Udasin in taking on the pain as somebody who takes care of the wounded warriors.

“Didn’t learn it in a textbook,” Adler sang. “Born with it. Sainly tolerance. We’re still here because of it. Cherish those protecting us from being on that wall.”

Designated to introduce Dr. Udasin at the award ceremony was Dr. Peter Killeen, a retired Port Authority police officer and now the mental health clinician for the department. He responded to the WTC site on the afternoon of Sept. 11, 2001, and his view of Dr. Udasin has become quite acute.

He is a patient of the good doctor’s, having been diagnosed with 9/11-related cancer in 2009. In presenting Dr. Udasin, Killeen elaborated on her kindness and compassion.

“She has helped thousands of first responders in a way that will live on and imprint on generations to follow,” he began. “She’s not just a doctor, but a true healer of bodies and souls. I like to refer to Dr. Udasin as the Mother Teresa of first responders.

She’s that special.”

How can you not be at a loss for words after such a run of accolades? Dr. Udasin did want to be on record with a definitive thought after accepting the award.

“It’s nice to get an award,” she stated. “But my real reward is being able to take care of you all.”

With his last shot of recognition, Hulse captured the moment with a perspective from somebody who has been there. Not just as a patient, but also one of the PBA members who was at the hub of the union’s support service at the WTC site for almost three months of rescue and recovery.

“We would be probably reading twice as many names if it wasn’t for people like Dr. Udasin,” Hulse declared. “She’s the tip of that sword as far as I’m concerned. She’s been there for us since the very beginning. She’s been watching us and tracking us.”

He then doubled down on taking advantage of the WTC Health Program with a toast to Dr. Udasin. Again, this was by way of personal experience benefiting from her and her team working their fingers to the bone to provide resources and funding and advocating for those in the fight.

“Don’t be afraid to go, because sometimes we don’t want to know. Don’t be afraid to go there and find out what you have and manage it,” Hulse added. “When I walk in her office, I feel like I disappoint her every year about how I don’t take care of myself. She writes out all this stuff, gives me numerous prescriptions. But now I am starting to follow her instructions.”



Police Unity Tour Founder Pat Montuore, right, chats with Dr. Udasin after she was honored with the 9/11 Service above Self Award.