



Jon Krawczyk and his cross at St. Peter's church | Dan Rosenblum

A replacement for the “Ground Zero cross” is installed at St. Peter’s Church, quietly and uncontroversially

by Dan Rosenblum | 08/12/2011 02:33 PM EDT

“When you’re tall, you’re allowed to cry a little bit,” Jon Krawczyk said Thursday night as he stood on a downtown sidewalk before the newly installed cross at St. Peter’s Church. “How do you create something to replace something so beautiful? That cross was here and it meant so much to so many people.”

After he built the cross, a reflective, wavy-metal sculpture commissioned to replace the famous "9/11 Cross" recently removed from St. Peter's, the tall blond-haired sculptor hauled it in a pick-up truck from his studio in Malibu, California to St. Peter’s Church in Lower Manhattan. Last night’s dedication marked the last stop in a tour across the United States, as Krawczyk, 41, and a film crew travelled 5,000 miles, stopping along the way to show off his work.

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The original 9/11 cross was found in the wreckage of the towers and subsequently mounted at St. Peter's, where it stayed until it was moved last month to the September 11th Memorial & Museum at the former World Trade Center site across the street.

Once it was unveiled, Krawczyk's new cross towered over Church Street, its surface polished to reflect the crowd, the sky, and the emerging form of 4 World Trade Center.

Shortly before Krawczyk was to begin a speech dedicating the new cross, his mother, Nancy Johanson, slowly made her way through a crowd of 40 people and handed out yellow ribbons. She said the attendees were mostly friends and family including her children, and some of her grandchildren and cousins.

"I heard the president's in town, but I don't think he's coming," she joked.

Krawczyk's sculptures have been installed across the country in corporate offices, hotels and stadiums (including Newark's Prudential Center), but this is his highest-profile piece so far.

Last month, an atheist group filed a lawsuit asserting that use of government money to put the original 9/11 cross in the museum violated the separation of church and state.

By contrast, there was no political element to Thursday night's dedication, and little fanfare. There were no police or barricades. PATH-bound commuters briskly walked through the small crowd that was there for the dedication, which was partly drowned out by Academy buses.

The cross was built hollow, and on his way to New York, Krawczyk encouraged people to put in notes and symbols of loss.

"I put a note in there, do you know what it says?" said Krawczyk's friend Scot Taylor, who helped install the cross late the night before. "Welcome all to the family. Because when you die, we're all family."

That hole was sealed up with a piece of the fallen World Trade Center. When it rains, rust from the piece of metal will drip down the rest of the cross, simulating a gradually bleeding heart.

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“This thing hasn’t even started yet,” said Taylor.

During the dedication, Krawczyk, who is originally from New Jersey, stood with his children and his mother on his right. On his left were St. Peter’s priest Kevin Madigan, Krawczyk’s gallery representative Lee Spiro, and Richard Sheirer, New York’s Emergency Management Commissioner during the September 11 attacks.

Krawczyk teared up as he explained his intentions.

“One young man in Indiana, he just lost his mom to cancer,” he said. “A 13-year-old boy put a cross that his mom had given him. Another fireman, his friend and fellow [firefighter] died, he put his shirt in there.

“You see that hope. This thing is filled with hope. I’m gonna slice a little hole in this shell, where people will be able to continue to put prayers or messages or what they want. It doesn’t have to be because you’re Catholic or Christian or Jewish or one religion. It’s not about them to me. It’s about people and the goodness, the sacrifice which makes love.”

About Sheirer, the only official-type who took part in the dedication, Krawczyk said, “I’m gonna call him Richie because in the four times we’ve met him, he’s become a friend. He walked in the barn that day and we said, ‘Oh my gosh, Giuliani’s right-hand-man, he’s an important guy.’ We were worried that he was going to stake us out, find out what we’re doing here. He walked in with this big smile and a big heart. He’s not even Christian. He’s a Jewish fellow. And he was moved by this cross and moved by the idea of what we’re doing. And I’m proud to call him a friend now.”

(Sheirer had gone to meet Krawczyk in a "barn" at his parents' house in Boonton, N.J., where the cross was getting a final polish before its delivery into Manhattan.)

Krawczyk also announced plans to create an education fund for the children of first responders.

When asked, people at the event said they had respected atheists’ beliefs, but didn’t see the reasoning for the lawsuit.

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“I’ve been around for a while,” Sheirer said. “I haven’t seen any atheists sue the Metropolitan Museum of Art for their religious icons there. Or any other major museum, which every museum has religious icons. I think they pick their spots for publicity. I think it’s disgusting, I think they should really think what they’re doing. I think the public and atheists who really believe in atheism—which I find hard to have people believe in atheism —I think even many atheists are upset with the organization that’s filed the lawsuit.”

After the dedication, Krawczyk stood by church’s fence and greeted each member of the crowd and posed for pictures in front of the cross. As the sidewalk emptied out he said he finally got a chance to see the cross in its final setting.

“I hope that people come and see this and it guides them to the new museum,” Krawczyk said. “Because that’s what this is about. It’s about all the people and the sacrifice and so I hope they see this. If they don’t know about the museum and they weren’t going to go there, I hope they see this and it makes them walk down there.”

He still had some finishing touches planned for the next day including welding a metal book with 35 pages listing the names of 9/11 victims and pouring a concrete base.

“I figure I’ll have a couple of beers tonight,” Krawczyk said. “Tomorrow I’ve gotta get back on it.”