Good Evening and thank you all for coming to honor and remember September 11, 2001 – a day that most of us will never and should never forget. People came together in unity on that day and the days that followed. We can all remember where we were on 9/11 because it was a day that changed the face of America.

It was a somber day; a sad day; a day that changed us as individuals, families, governments and nations. A disparate day- one that brought terrorism and fear, and evil in our midst; but also brought unity, strength and courage to the communities of New York City, and the nation, and all of those called upon in grief and resolve to make a difference. And all of us responded!

We held hands, broke down barriers and stood together in solidarity to proclaim the United States of America would not be defeated.

Though it seems like yesterday, it was a day 13 years ago! Many of you present tonight were maybe 5 to 8 years old – just beginning your life as school age children – probably not able to grasp the fear and the vulnerability that we, your parents and families, felt.

As I stand with you this evening, a flood of memories engulfs me. I was not at home with my family on that day, in fact, I was on the west coast for business and because of the time change, I did not know about the first plane hitting the World Trade Center until my wife called me. Was it an accident? What could have gone wrong? As we spoke, I turned on the TV and immediately watched the second plane hit the Twin Towers. It was then that we both realized we were under attack. With my family in Maryland and schools closing immediately due to the proximity to the Nation’s Capital our first question was what about the kids. Which of our four children in three different schools in Maryland she should pick up first – the younger ones who were your age then, who didn’t really understand what was going on; or the older ones who would be more frightened because they knew and understood the gravity of what was happening. Nothing I did, or wanted to do could get me home to be with my family. I remember the feeling of helplessness – stranded thousands of miles away – and that hopeless feeling and fear for my family, my country and the world.

I remember our best friend – who had a daughter working in a building next to the Twin Towers – they could not contact her for over 24 hours and did not know if she was alive or dead. It was only later that we heard her story of assisting the elderly in a nearby care facility to escape to safety. She shared that she and her colleagues wrote their names, social security numbers, and phone numbers of significant others on their bodies in permanent marker in the event that they did not survive their attempts to relocate those in need to safety. She was not much older than you all at that time — a new college graduate seeking to make a difference in the world.

I recently learned from talks by our head football coach that he was in Nebraska, then CEO of TD Ameritrade, but most of his family worked and lived in NYC. His family was accounted for – except his son who was missing for hours. And he was helplessly waiting to hear if he was in the towers – or had escaped. Such emotions that we will never forget.
Remarks from Coastal Carolina University President David A. DeCenzo
September 11, 2014

These are a few examples of the terror that we as parents and adults felt at that time – helpless, scared, but willing to do what we could for the great country in which we lived.

The stories you have only heard about capture the essence of the American character: the courage to emerge from tragedy; the strength to recover and emerge stronger; and the resolve as a country to prevent 9/11 from ever happening again.

So that we never forget, I would like to share a few of the reflections and remembrances of those who were there remember.

• “I feel the resiliency of my faith as the biggest strength in helping build bridges of understanding with my fellow Americans.”
  -Lt. Col. Shareda Hosein, U.S. Army Reserves, Muslim Chaplain

• "Tom was a hero on Flight 93. He and his fellow passengers were drafted unknowingly as the first citizen-soldiers in the war on terrorism."
  -Beverly and Thomas Burnett, Sr., parents of Tom Burnett

• “In this hell I found grace.”
  -Fr. James Martin

• "The preciousness and also the precarious and vulnerable nature of the fundamental gift of life burned its way into the depth of our souls.”
  -Monsignor Anthony Sherman, Brooklyn pastor

• "I did not see the devil's face at Ground Zero. I saw the face of God in the people working, caring, sweating, crying, rescuing, recovering and being very spiritual in their very humanness."
  -Franciscan Father Joseph Bayne, chief chaplain of New York's Erie County Emergency Services

In a National Public Radio editorial after the World Trade Center attacks, Scott Simon, a journalist, said:

“Patriotism is not based on a blind belief that the United States has no need to change, he said. God knows we need to change in many ways. Rather, our love for America rests on the belief that the changes needed are more likely to occur here than anywhere else in the world. Like most Americans, I felt unbearably helpless, and wounded, and deeply sad.”

Perhaps the quote that gives me great hope for the future was written by Gordon MacDonald in his journal which reads as follows:
“And more than once I asked myself – as everyone asks – is God here? And I decided that He is closer to this place than any other place I’ve ever visited. The strange irony is that, amidst this absolute catastrophe of unspeakable proportions, there is a beauty in the way human beings are acting that defines the imagination. Everyone – underscore, everyone – is everyone else’s brother or sister. There are no strangers among the thousands at the work site. Everyone talks; everyone cooperates; everyone does the next thing that has to be done. No job is too small, too humble, or, on the other hand, too large. Tears ran freely, affection was exchanged openly, exhaustion was defied. We all stopped caring about ourselves. The words ‘it’s not about me’ were never more true.”

As we leave here this evening, may we take these words to heart because they are true every day and define civility and humanity.

And may we as an educated society continue to seek nonviolent actions in the pursuit of justice.

Thank you!