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## 'A Lot to Live Up To'

*Out drinking with New York's bravest, my name brought me undeserved honor.*

**by Michael Judge**

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A few nights after terrorists brought down the World Trade Center I spent the night drinking with a handful of New York's bravest. They were firemen from Harlem and the Bronx just coming off a grueling, 12-hour search-and-rescue shift. All day they'd been tearing through the mountain of concrete and carnage where the towers once soared. Between beers and shots at a dive called Milano's, they told my two friends and me of the horrors they'd witnessed and the hope they had of saving more lives. They were determined. They were heartbroken. This was no casual drink; this was self-medication by the pint. They, sadly, were the lucky ones. They were beaten and bruised, their uniforms still covered in the white, asbestos ash that blanketed lower Manhattan. But they were alive. They breathed in and out in a smoke-filled bar while hundreds of their brothers lay buried in the rubble barely a mile away.

As they struggled to put their emotions into words, as they gasped for breath between gulps of whiskey and beer, they told us stories of life and death: how one woman rode a collapsing tower down from the 40th floor and lived to tell about it; how all they were finding were remnants of some 6,000 lives--wallets, purses, picture frames and, yes, the remains of those they hoped to save. Hanging on to one another, they told and retold their stories of grief, anger and, incredibly, forgiveness. They weren't just living; they were holding on to life with everything they had. They were glowing with life. They were, quite simply, heroes.

When they discovered my name was Michael Judge, pronounced the same as Father Mychal Judge, the New York Fire Department chaplain who lost his life in the attack, they were beside themselves. They shouted up and down the bar, "Mychal Judge is here! Mychal Judge is here!" From that point on I couldn't buy them any more drinks. They held me back. They bought me shots and raised their glasses to Mychal Judge. They celebrated his life through mine. Father Judge, of course, was one of the first to arrive at the blackened and burning towers. He lost his life administering last rites to a stricken fireman as the towers burned terribly above. No American will soon forget the photograph of firefighters carrying his limp body, arms outstretched, through the hell that surrounded them. One thinks of Calvary, carrying Christ from the cross.

The nation now knows of Father Judge's kindness and courage, and how, as many have said, he "died as he lived," administering to the spiritual needs of New York's bravest. But back in the fall of 1996, I--like most people who live outside the city--had never heard of Father Judge.

Oddly, I have a cabby to thank for the introduction. As a student at Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism, I was woefully unfamiliar with New York City and the people who make it great.

Hopelessly lost in Queens, I hailed a cab. The driver was a talker--as many New Yorkers are--and eventually got around to asking my name.

When I told him, he spun around in delight shouting, "The holiest man in New York is Mychal Judge. Father Mychal Judge!" For the next 30 blocks he told me of Father Judge's life work, how he fed and clothed the homeless, comforted AIDS patients and devoted his soul to God's work and his heart to each and every firefighter in New York. "With a name like that, you've got a lot to live up to," he said as I coughed up the fare.

A few days later I decided to call Father Judge in the hope of one day meeting my namesake. The voice on the other end of the phone was nothing like I had expected. It wasn't the voice of a saint, but the rapid-fire tenor of an Irish New Yorker who loved to make you laugh. Laughter, it soon became clear, was a form of prayer for him; he used it to treat the wounds of his firefighters, the needy and infirm. Unfortunately, I never had the pleasure of meeting Father Judge in person, something I will always regret. I never made it down to St. Francis of Assisi on West 31st Street or visited him at the firehouse, Hook and Ladder Company No. 24, across the street, as we had talked about that afternoon so long ago.

So it was with a doubly heavy heart that I attended his funeral on the Saturday after the attack. In the shadow of St. Francis on a mid- September morning I joined a hundred firefighters and wept for the loss of their father.

I will always think back on that whiskey-soaked night at Milano's as the closest I ever came to knowing what he meant to these men. Most of the firemen I drank with that night were Irish and Italian, the Catholic sons of Catholic fathers and grandfathers. I'm not the most religious of men, but I believe I felt the Holy Spirit there that night. I felt it in the voices of New York's bravest. I felt it in the way they honored Father Judge through me--a complete stranger with the name of a man they loved, a man who gave his life that they might live.

It was an unholy, but necessary, communion for a very holy man. To say that I felt unworthy would be a gross understatement. To say that I felt honored, that I felt ashamed, that I felt heartbroken would be closer to the truth.

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