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Dennis Duggan

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"Those Boys Were His Twin Towers"

September 18, 2001

"I THINK they're alive and fighting with one another like they did when they were growing up," retired Fire Capt. John Vigiano told me yesterday. "I can just hear John telling his younger brother Joe, 'Now listen to me, I know the way out of here better than you do.'"

Vigiano, 62, had just come back from a daily visit to the World Trade Center, where he believes his two sons - one a police officer, the other a firefighter - are trapped.

"It's the west quadrangle of the north tower," he said, relying on a veteran's instincts along with the knowledge of where the two departments assigned his sons last Tuesday.

"They called me every day before going to work and told me they loved me, and I told them I loved them," Vigiano said. He said Joseph called first and John a few minutes later.

"I told him to look out for his brother, he's working on the street," Vigiano said. "And that was it."

Vigiano is a legend even in a department where legends abound. He was given last rites twice in his 36 years of fighting fires. He was off a year while fighting throat cancer, and when he returned to work, he broke a shoulder. His father was a firefighter, and he wears a ring his father gave him.

"I'm going to pass this on to my grandson, Joseph, who is 8 now," he said.

The Vigianos, who live in Deer Park, are staying in a hotel in the city, and they are escorted by police everywhere they go. Vigiano appreciates what the police are doing to make him and his wife comfortable. "It means a lot to us. It's keeping us going."

Vigiano is a former Marine, and he enlisted by forging his mother's name to an application.

"The Marines didn't like that," he said. His pride in his sons is evident as he recalls their boyhood high jinks and their ability to sew and to cook.

His older son, John, 36, is a firefighter in Ladder 132 in Bedford-Stuyvesant, and his other son, Joe, 34, is a detective now working with the Police

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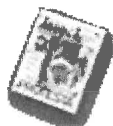
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Department's Emergency Services Squad 3 in Harlem.

"I'm praying for a miracle," Vigiano said, his eyes welling up. "They are the light of our lives."

Vigiano and his wife, Jan, 61, are deeply religious. When I asked Jan how she coped in a family where her husband and a son fought fires and another son fought bad guys, she said, "I prayed."

There are a lot of firefighters and cops who are being tested by this ordeal. But few are being tested more than the Vigianos. It is impossible to understand their feelings because they are so singular. Few in the uniformed services have had to deal with the loss of two sons at the same time.

"Those boys were his twin towers," said First Deputy Commissioner Joseph Dunne, who was commanding officer of the 75th Precinct in East New York when Joe Vigiano worked there.

"He was one of the best cops I ever met," Dunne said of Joe Vigiano, who was wounded encounters.

Both of the Vigiano sons are married. John and his wife, Colette, have two girls, Colette, 2. Joseph and his wife, Kathy, who is also a cop, have three boys - Joseph, 8, James, 6, months old.

John Vigiano has pictures of all of his grandchildren in his wallet. He's quick to show ther thoughts always come back to his two sons.

"Joe, he was the one who made people laugh. John was the serious one but he could rai They are amazing boys and close. When Joe was about to become an Eagle Scout, John 'Wait for me, we'll do it together.' And they did a few months later."

Mario Zorvic, who worked with Joe Vigiano, said Joe "was a stand-up guy, always willing and help anybody."

"He was fun-loving, joking," Zorvic told Newsday's Sean Gardiner yesterday. "With so mu work being tragedy, we have to joke around just to make it bearable. It's our way of dealii tragedy."

The Vigianos met President George W. Bush at the Javits Center on Friday. "The preside Jan, my wife, and he said, 'She reminds me of my mother.'"

He pauses for a moment and then shakes his head, reflecting on the emotions he is feeli

"Now I am finding out what my wife went through with me all these years. Firefighters are heart," he said.

Earlier, I watched Vigiano talking to young cops and firefighters who had come to an inte in the police auditorium. They hung on his every word.

"I tell them that there are three things they need to pay attention to. The first is their famil is their unit and the third is their department," he said. "And I tell them to kiss their wives morning."

Vigiano reflects on what he has seen in the past few days. "It is beyond belief. It's like a v come back."

Being a firefighter is a calling. "It's not just a job. My sons went into that building not to fig rescue people, to get them out of harm's way."

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