



FDNY Chief Bill Feehan Remembered

Of the 343 FDNY members who lost their lives on 9/11, among the highest-ranking was First Deputy Fire Commissioner William Feehan. He was a larger-than-life figure whose spirit of servant leadership, passion for his profession and devotion to protecting the citizens of New York prompted a friend to say, quite simply, “He is the Fire Department.”

Recently, some of his children — Elizabeth, Bill and his wife Beth, as well as Tara and her husband Brian who currently serves as an FDNY firefighter with Battalion 19 in the Bronx — shared their reflections on Chief Feehan and his legacy. ►

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What inspired your father to pursue a career in public safety?

Elizabeth “My grandfather was a firefighter and he and my father were very close, so my father always aspired to that. He held a degree and taught school, so he was totally suited for other areas of life. But he had a love for the department and the city as a whole ... a very deep and abiding love.”

What was it like growing up with a dad who was a first responder?

Elizabeth “He’d come home with the most colorful stories. He loved the job so much. He loved the other firefighters.”

Tara “You know, he came home smelling of smoke, but it was always obvious how much he loved it. Always.”

Elizabeth “But I think it should be mentioned, also, it takes a lot of studying to rise in the department, and you need a lot of support from your spouse to do that, you know? So, every time my father got promoted, he would always thank my mother for giving him the time to study.”

Your father was a remarkable leader.

Can you talk about his approach to leadership?

Bill “I think the combination of his character and his competence really defined his leadership. The character he had all the way through, and people saw that and really responded to that. The competence came from the fact that he was passionate about what he did, he really loved the New York City Fire Department and he worked very hard. He didn’t take any shortcuts. He earned his credibility at every step along the way, and he generated respect from people as he gained positions of authority. He kept his humanity and his compassion. And that’s why people really loved him.”

Elizabeth “That’s true. Even the elevator operator at headquarters said, ‘Your father treated me like I was his fellow chief.’”

Tara “When you were speaking to him, he made you feel like you were the most important person in the room. Whatever you were saying to him or speaking to him about, he was very much focused on what you were saying. He listened very heartily and carefully to people, and he had that way about him that you just wanted to be in his presence a lot.”

How would you describe the legacy he left behind?

Tara “The amount of pride that we have I don’t think could be put into words. As a father, what he was to all of us was certainly one thing. But the way we lost him, as tragic as it was, I feel lucky almost. We’re so proud and so lucky that he was ours and that this is the way he died ... doing something he loved so much and trying to save people.”

Bill “He was a hero to us long before 9/11, and for very specific and wonderful reasons. I would say, too, that he was an extraordinary person for all the reasons we’ve talked about, but at the same time he was emblematic of a whole community of people who do this, you know? He stands out but he doesn’t stand alone.”

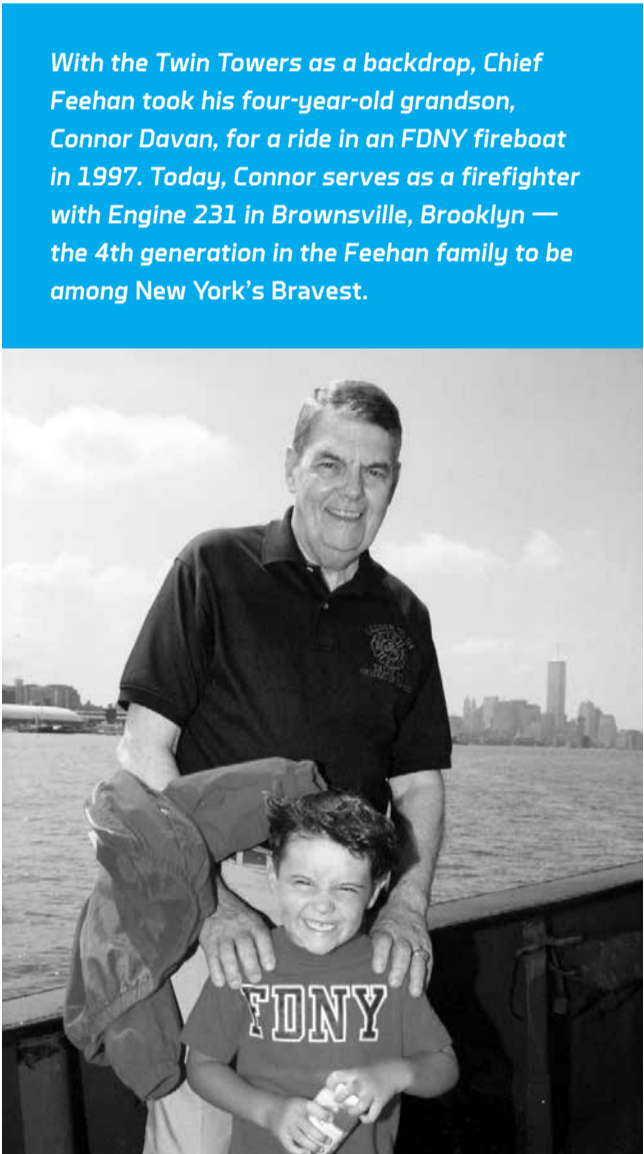
Elizabeth “My father’s career in the fire department is one thing. What he really gave to us as a family, as far as passing on our faith and taking care of each other through thick or thin, no matter what ... that is what really is timeless. I can’t tell you how much he loved the city. He knew every backstreet of every borough. But the most important thing for us is our faith and our love of family and knowing that you go 100% for that.”

Brian “You know, this is the 20th anniversary of 9/11, but in our family it’s much more present all the time. For me — who’s still active and working in a firehouse with Battalion 19 in the Bronx — it’s all around us. I stay on the job because every day I get to help people. It’s still about answering the bell, jumping on the red rig, racing through the streets and helping. Many don’t realize, there’s a fireboat named after him. When [the FDNY] goes to respond to a capsized boat or people in the water, people in trouble, it’s the Feehan that’s responding. So here it is, 20 years later, and the Feehan is still out there helping residents of this city, and that’s a wonderful legacy.”

Beth “When I came up with the idea to do a film about my father-in-law, I had absolute carte blanche to do it because every single person he touched was willing to talk about him. There wasn’t a door that was shut. Everyone — and I had a bunch of people that he worked with — they would do anything for Bill Feehan. That’s the impact that he had. It was absolutely profound. He showed people such decency and respect and it touched everyone.”

If you could let the people who read this tribute know one thing about your dad, what would it be?

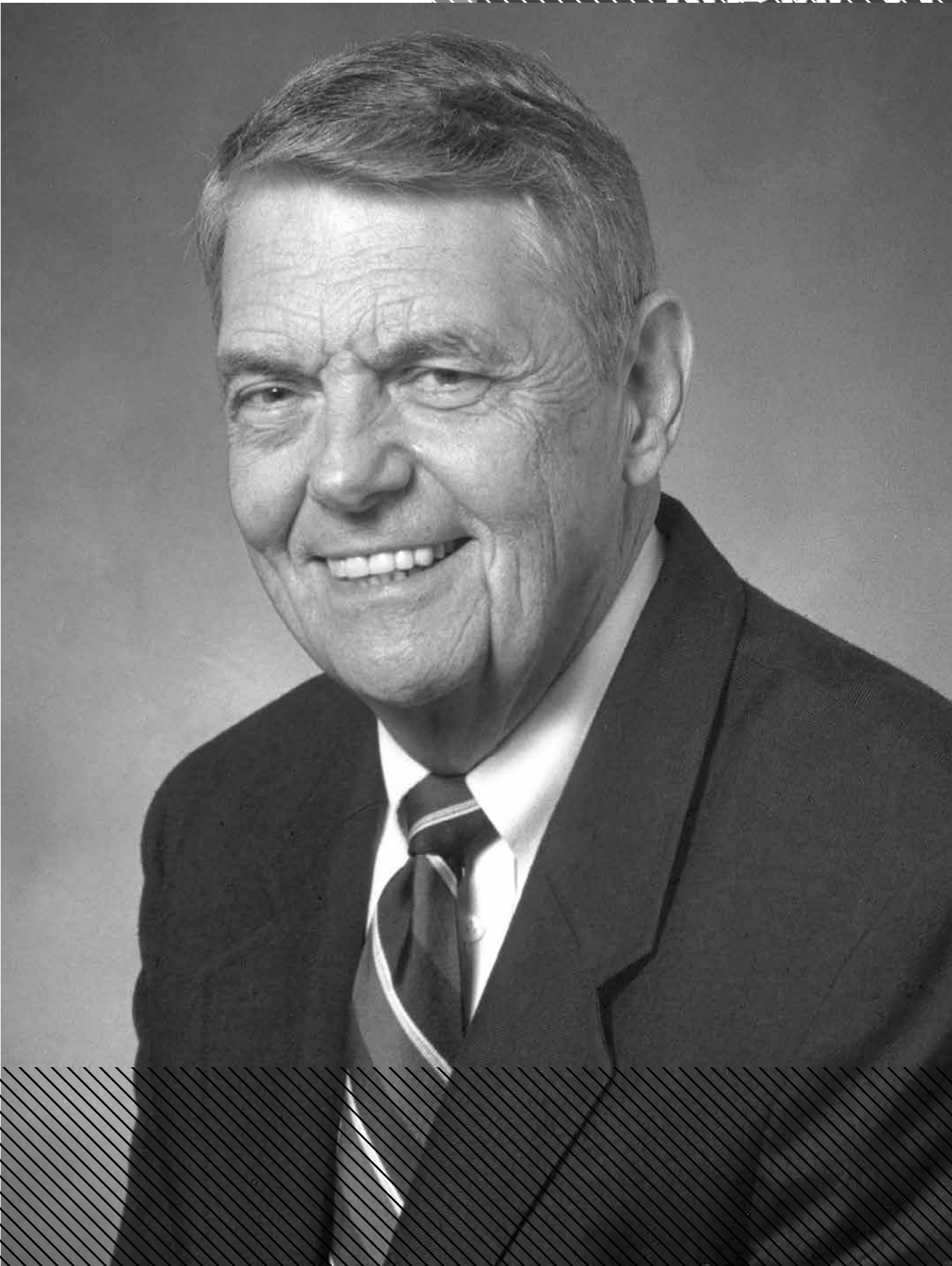
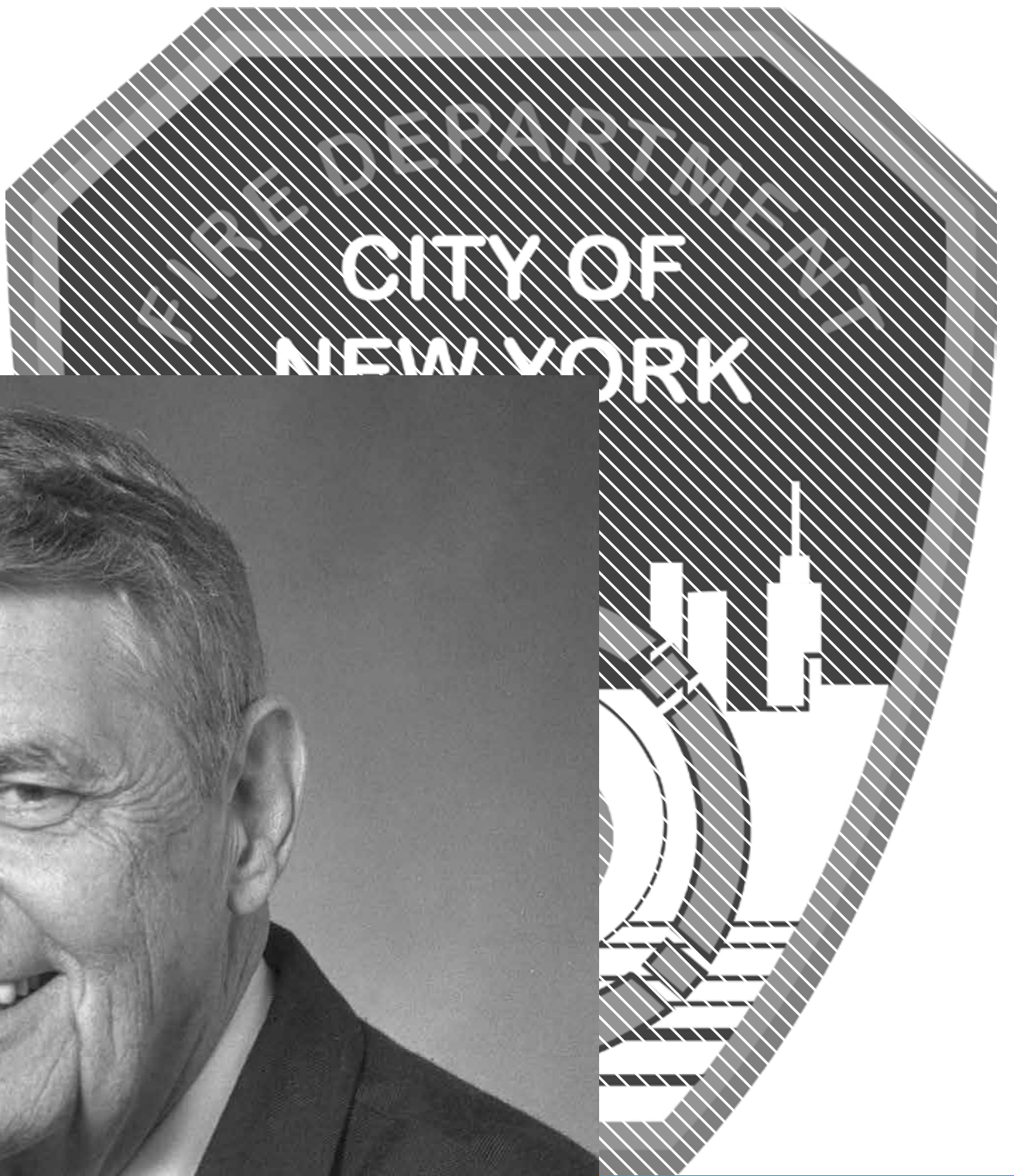
Bill “For me, it’s very simple, and I didn’t think of this until you asked that question. This is someone who, from the beginning to the end, in all dimensions, lived for others. He lived his life for others.”



Chief

A documentary film about Chief Feehan will air in the New York area on WNET next Friday, Sept. 10, at 9:30 p.m. ET. Coming soon, *Chief* will also be available to viewers nationwide to livestream on [FDNYpro.org](https://www.fdnyp.org). All donations from film viewers will help support the FDNY George F. Mand Library’s digitization and modernization initiatives.





Chief Feehan was an advocate for advancing technology within the fire department.



“He lived his life for others.”

