

NEVER FORGOTTEN

Bernie Williams had often wondered about the woman from the armory.

In the years since his retirement from baseball, whenever someone would ask him about his most memorable moment in pinstripes, the former center fielder would instinctively flash back to 2001. The terrorist attacks on Sept. 11 opened many eyes to the evil forces wishing to harm the United States and changed much about Americans' way of life.

But 9/11 also brought out the very best in people. Strangers united as one, coming to the aid of their fellow citizens in profound ways. Patriotism abounded as Americans, though grief-stricken, vowed to uphold President George W. Bush's words, delivered on the same day of the attacks, that "These acts shatter steel, but they cannot dent the steel of American resolve."

Williams saw that resolve firsthand when, a few days after 9/11, he was part of a contingent of Yankees who visited several sites around the city where relief and recovery efforts were taking place. Their first stop was the 69th Regiment Armory, where Williams, unsure of what to do or whether a

ballclub should even be there at all, saw a Red Cross volunteer who had clearly been working around the clock.

"I don't know what to say," Williams said to the woman, "but can I give you a hug?"

Nearly 18 years had passed since that brief encounter, a simple, quiet moment that spoke volumes. Earlier this year, when the 9/11 Memorial & Museum invited Williams to speak about his experiences in the aftermath of Sept. 11, he thought back to that embrace and to everything that had occurred in the weeks that followed. Perhaps by sharing his recollections of the most poignant time period of his life, Williams could arrive at some sort of closure.

At the very least, maybe he could find out the woman's name.

Williams already knew that New Yorkers were special. He had heard their impassioned chants at Yankee Stadium countless times, and had seen how they came out by the millions for the Yankees' World Series victory parades.

But for all of the outpouring of love and support that he received from Yankees fans, Williams, by his own admission, remained somewhat aloof. It wasn't that he didn't appreciate them. It was just that, well, Williams marched to a different beat than most ballplayers. Moments before a big game, when amped-up guys would be trying to contain their excitement and manage their adrenaline, Williams might be off in a quiet corner of the clubhouse, plucking an acoustic guitar or catching a few last z's. When the game began, he'd still be off in his own world to some extent, blocking out any and all distractions — including the raucous crowd — so that he could focus on his job.

Williams' approach worked well for him. Today, visitors to Yankee Stadium can head down to Monument Park and read all about his career accomplishments on the plaque that sits below his retired No. 51. After witnessing the way New Yorkers responded to 9/11, though, something changed. His connection with them — and the city — grew deeper. In the Yankees' first game back at Yankee Stadium, on Sept. 25, 2001, Williams recalls exiting the home clubhouse and seeing the hallway leading to the batting cage in right field lined on both sides by police officers, firefighters and medical professionals. He shook every one of their hands.

"I remember looking everybody in the eyes and asking them, 'You OK? How are you doing?'" Williams says. "They said, 'We've got our hopes on you guys. You're gonna do this for us.' It was like this kinetic energy that I couldn't really explain sort of passed on to me. And I felt it. I really, really felt it."

It had been two weeks since the world stopped. On that bright blue-skied morning of Sept. 11, before the chaos ensued, strap-hangers hustling to work might have flipped to the sports section to see if Roger Clemens had made history the night before. The Yankees' ace was scheduled to face his former team, the Red Sox, at Yankee Stadium with a chance to become the first pitcher in history to begin a season 20-1. Instead, readers learned about the formation of a new regional television network called Yankees Entertainment and Sports, or YES. (The Sept. 10 game was rained out.)



Whenever he is asked about a memorable moment from his playing days, Williams harks back to 2001. Speaking at the 9/11 Memorial & Museum earlier this year, Williams recalled in great detail what it was like playing for the New York Yankees in the aftermath of 9/11, and how those experiences have stayed with him ever since.