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Educators and students wearing memorial T-shirts pose after the 9/11 ceremony. At right is Dean of Students Tracey Fails. In the back row at left is Shawn Kynard, the school's behavior intervention assistant.

Students reflect on 9/11, classmate Joe Moses

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The gathering of all 214 students outdoors and the releasing of balloons filled with messages of peace was intended to be the school's remembrance of 9/11.

But some school officials and students made sure it was also a remembrance of another 9/11, one more personal and, in its own way, much more heartbreaking – Joe Moses' birthday.

Joe, a 12-year-old seventh grader, died tragically last May 27. He was buried on the last day of the school year, and some faculty and students wore memorial T-shirts at the cemetery.

"It was a difficult time and it was a difficult summer and it's been a difficult first week [of school]," said Tracey Fails, the dean of students at Englewood Peace Academy.

Born Sept. 11, 1995, the well-loved student, despite the misgivings of the school's director, was remembered Sept. 11, 2008, as some faculty – including Ms. Fails – and some students wore the "Rest in Peace" T-shirts again for the 9/11 commemoration.

"He was funny, smart," said China Byrd, who never thought she wouldn't see Joe in her eighth-grade class this year. "He always made me laugh. And sometimes he made me mad but I forgive him. And I know he's in a better place right now.

"I know if I would have passed away he never would have forgotten me."

Joe, a studious African American pre-teen who easily made friends, for reasons no one will ever know for sure, took his own life last May. But the manner of his death makes remembrance uncomfortable for some. On the morning of Sept. 11, someone used paper cups to spell out "We Miss U Joe Moses" in the chain-link fence fronting the academy on Detroit Avenue in the central city. The school's director removed the "Joe Moses" part of the message before the 9/11 ceremony.

"I took his name down," Director Mark Sholl said. "This wasn't supposed to focus just on Joe. ... I don't know who put the cups out there. Nobody asked me for permission to do that."

"We Miss U" was all that was left on the fence message when the 9/11 ceremony began. Mr. Sholl said it was appropriate because it meant the school that calls itself "peacebuilders" was remembering the 3,000 Americans killed in the 2001 terrorist attacks, as well as a school maintenance man and a teacher's aide who died in the last four years.

"How many of you remember Mr. Jerry?" Mr. Sholl asked the assembled students at the ceremony's beginning. Several students raised their hands to indicate they remembered the maintenance man, Jerry Szarlip, who died two years ago.

Mr. Sholl did not ask the students if they remembered Joe Moses. But most of the students did, especially the eighth-graders who until May 27 never expected that Joe wouldn't be with them for the 2008-09 school year. "He was a fine person," a somber Marcell Scott said after the releasing of the peace-message balloons. "He was always a team player and he was smart. And he liked reading.

"I just know he's in a better place and he's still probably the same person that he always was," the eighth-grader said.

What kind of person was Joe Moses? Incredibly bright, he had attended Washington Local Schools before being transferred to Englewood by his father for last school year. He instantly made friends and instantly impressed his teachers with his educational acumen.

Shawn Kynard, the school's behavior intervention assistant, said he knew Joe well. He got to know the young man not through his job assignment but by seeing and talking to Joe in the school halls. "He was really smart. He was just an all around great kid," Mr. Kynard said. "No problems with him at all. Just a great kid. I would say he was definitely one of our model students."

But Joe took his own life. Doesn't that mean that the less said about the student, the better? "I don't think it's fair and I'm sure there's quite a few of us here that don't," said Mr. Kynard, who also wore a memorial T-shirt.

"I mean, we can't talk about it?" he said. "There's no reason not to talk about it. It's about celebrating his life. It's not about what happened, how it happened. It's the fact that he's not here anymore."

The school's director said the balloons with peace messages were meant to commemorate the people killed in 2001 when terrorists piloted airliners into New York's Twin Towers and the Pentagon.

"We're doing something on 9/11 because we're **peacebuilders**," Mr. Sholl said. "That's the purpose of our school.

"Today it's Joe's birthday," he added, "and I guess the kids are, I guess, reeling. It's kind of turned into thinking about Joe, too."

In his office, before having his teachers bring out the kids to release the balloons, the academy director was aware that some faculty members and students were wearing memorial T-shirts. The shirts have a pair of hands folded in prayer, the words "Rest in Peace" across the top, Joe's birth and death dates, and a photo that Joe took of himself and downloaded into a school computer.

In the photo, Joe Moses is unsmiling but he is extending two fingers in the symbol of the peace sign. "Joe is involved in it but it wasn't supposed to be the focal point," Mr. Sholl said about the ceremony. "They've always talked about him," the director said. "It's not like a big topic of conversation but they bring it up. I guess maybe for kids, it's kind of a traumatic experience ... and probably for many adults, too."

Ms. Fails, like Mr. Kynard and many Englewood students, choose to remember the young man's life, not his death.

"Joe was able to talk about world events," she said. "He was very articulate and very, very smart." He was gone by the time the school received the students' results from the Ohio Achievement Tests. Joe passed all of his, either with "proficient" or "advanced" ratings, Ms. Fails said.

Was Joe Moses important to her personally?

"He was – you know what? He represents the student that we want to develop," Ms. Fails said. "We feel that it happened the way that it did, but he impacted our lives so much that he pulled the family, the school family, together."

The 9/11 ceremony occurred during the month designated as Suicide Prevention Month. It is a topic young people should not ignore, the dean said.

"We're trying to educate the students to become more aware," Ms. Fails said. "We want them to speak up about things that are happening in their lives."

Outside the charter school, Mr. Sholl focused on the terrorist attacks of seven years ago – when some of Englewood's student was still unborn – and the importance of releasing peace balloons.

"As most of you kids know, back in 2001 we had a big terrorist attack on the United States and thousands of people died," he told the children. "So we're saying to everyone that we're going to be **peacebuilders** and we're going to spread that peace."

With only one sentence did the school director acknowledge their former classmate. "Thousands" is a number that may or may not impress grade-school students when it's regarding long-ago deaths of people who lived far away, but Joe Moses was a person the students knew well, admired and loved. But they didn't hear much about him from the man who earlier took the "Joe Moses" paper cups out of the fence.

"Many of you know today was also Joe Moses' birthday so also we're taking this time to remember him," were the only words Mr. Sholl said about Joe to the students.

Ms. Fails remembers Joe's funeral vividly. Adults and kids from the mostly black Englewood Peace Academy wore the memorial T-shirts at the cemetery. They encountered there white adults and students from Joe's former school in the Washington Local district. Many of the white students wore Joe Moses memorial T-shirts of their own design.

"And they kind of looked over at our students and our students looked at them and they gave them that nod, like 'yeah, we're together,'" Ms. Fails said. "So that was pretty cool that we had that unity, at least for that day." If the academy director had little to say about Joe Moses, Akilah Parker has plenty of remembrances. She is in the eighth grade now, and starting the new school year without Joe has been painful for her. But there is nothing wrong in remembering and talking about him, she said.

"He was one of my best friends," Akilah said. "He was like a person I could go to and talk to about anything that I was going through. And he would give me advice. I'd tell him what was going on around my house and he'd give me advice on what to do and what not to do."

Where is her friend Joe now, Akilah was asked.

"He's with God, the Lord," she said. "He's thinking that we've done something good for him. He's probably smiling down at us right about now."