

Concert begun as 9/11 tribute now aids hurricane victims, too

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(Photo: NJMG File Photo.)

Ten years ago, when Mike Shirota organized the first installment of a concert benefit in Manhattan, he didn't know the event would grow the way it did.

The Paramus man had found himself with a sudden urge to help families affected by the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. The Japanese native and music conductor had just learned that several Japanese-American families were affected by the tragedy, and each September they returned to Ground Zero.

"It started 10 years ago, when I met a father of one of the victims. We graduated from the same college in Japan," said Shirota. "I found out there were more than 20 Japanese victims, and the families were flying in to

attend the 9/11 ceremony in Manhattan."

Sept. 11 attacks: [16 years after, region's grief endures \(/story/news/new-jersey/2017/09/11/sept-11-attacks-16-years-after-regions-grief-endures/653175001/\)](#)

Ground Zero: [Crowds thin, but 9/11 ceremony draws families to Ground Zero \(/story/news/columnists/christopher-maag/2017/09/11/crowds-thin-but-9-11-ceremony-draws-families-ground-zero/653269001/\)](#)

World Trade Center: [Sixteen years after 9/11, pieces of World Trade Center live worldwide \(/story/news/new-jersey/2017/09/07/sixteen-years-after-9-11-pieces-world-trade-center-live-worldwide/639672001/\)](#)

But the number of those families flying in from his native Japan had dwindled over the years, with fewer families embarking on the 6,700-mile flight to attend the morning service at the World Trade Center memorial each year. Shirota wanted to change that.

"As the time went on, there was less to do and people from Japan were reducing in numbers," he explained. "So I said, 'Why don't we have a concert to keep people coming back?'"

That's exactly what he did. Fast forward to today, Shirota's idea blossomed into an annual benefit show that fills Carnegie Hall for hours. This year, the Circle Wind Concert, a Japanese and American chorus festival, will take place Sunday at 5 p.m., serving as a way to unite people from both sides of the world to continue commemorating those lost 16 years ago on Sept. 11.

The first iteration of the event was held at a school in lower Manhattan and attracted a few hundred people, said Shirota. Today, the concert attracts a full audience inside Carnegie Hall's Stern auditorium, which holds more than 2,800 people.

Shirota, a music conductor by trade, has lived in Paramus for 30 years. In 1976, he migrated from Japan to the United States. He said he first dabbled in musical choir while in high school, and eventually worked his way up to conducting and writing music. He currently is the conductor of the Japan Choral Harmony "TOMO," a New York-based choir.

The group, which is co-hosting Sunday's event, will be performing alongside Coro Dabar from Coria del Rio in Spain, the Alexandria Harmonizers from Virginia, Tohoku University's male and mixed chorus clubs from Japan, and the Circle Wind Boys & Girls Club. Circle Wind is also co-hosting the festival.

Although the show started as a way to support 9/11 families, the benefit evolved to support victims of other tragedies, explained Shirota.

Since its inception, charitable funds have also been donated to victims of the 9-magnitude earthquake that rocked Japan on March 11, 2011. The earthquake created a devastating tsunami that killed more than 15,000 people and left survivors in temporary housing even six years later. Proceeds also supported Japanese families in 2016 after a 6.9-magnitude earthquake struck off the Japanese coast, devastating regions that were still reeling from the 2011 disaster.

This year, funds raised will be donated to recovery efforts in Texas and Florida, as those regions reel from the devastation brought by Hurricanes Harvey and Irma.

"We focused on 9/11 families at first," said Shirota. "But, we've seen so many tragedies, both natural and human-made. We want to continue to support each other."

Doors for the benefit show at Carnegie Hall open at 4:30 p.m. Sunday, with the show starting at 5 p.m. Tickets, priced at \$10, are available through the venue's box office. Donations are also accepted.

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