Grief and Love in Yankee Stadium

By Mary Ormsby

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The voices inside Yankee Stadium began to swell, a blend of empathy and pride that, for a moment, caused the 10-year-old boy they were cheering to lower his head.

The stadium's enormous electronic screen was telling the crowd about Robert Spencer, chosen to throw out the first pitch in July as part of the Yankees' HOPE Week — the ball club's tribute to victims of the 9/11 attacks. Robert was an infant when his father, also named Robert, was killed in the World Trade Center's North Tower.

Geoffrey Robson was standing beside Robert in front of the Yankee dugout and noticed the boy's solemn mood as he prepared to escort him to the mound. The 32-year-old executive board member of Tuesday's Children — a not-for-profit organization that pledges long-term support for the children of 9/11 families — knew instinctively what the child was feeling.

"I looked down at Robert and he was looking at his feet," recalls Robson. "He was thinking, 'All this is for me and I don't deserve it.' I could just tell that's what he was thinking because I've been there.''

Robson's father, Donald, a transplanted Torontonian living in New York, was also killed on Sept. 11, at the age of 52. Until the Yankees' screen broadcast Robert's background to the crowd, Geoffrey Robson hadn't realized both their fathers worked for international bond firm Cantor Fitzgerald.

“They lost everybody that day,” Robson notes of the 658 Cantor Fitzgerald employees killed, the single worst loss of life for any company on 9/11.

But the memories of Donald Robson were not lost.

The bond broker had met and married Katherine, a native of Manhasset, N.Y., while he worked in Toronto. The young couple lived in Toronto, where their first son, Geoffrey, was born. When the boy was 3, Donald was hired by Cantor Fitzgerald in New York City. A second son, Scott, arrived soon after.

Donald Robson loved his adopted country as much as his home and native land. On a tall pole rising from the family’s Manhasset front yard, the flags that fluttered displayed three of his great passions: Old Glory, the iconic Maple Leaf and the Toronto Blue Jays. In a neighbourhood full of Yankee faithful, Robson’s buddies sometimes swiped the Blue Jay banner as a gag. The Canadian always found that funny, his son recalled.

The last time Geoffrey Robson spoke to his dad was by phone on Sept. 8, 2001. The younger man was celebrating his 22nd birthday, and they chatted about his life at college in Delaware, which Donald loved to hear about. They ended the call by saying they loved each other.

“It’s not like we knew it was going to be our last conversation, but I’m glad those were the last words we said to each other,” says Robson, now married and working in New York for commercial real estate firm CB Richard Ellis.

One of Donald Robson’s favourite sayings was, “At the end of the day, all you have is your name,” his son recalls.

“What I take away from that is nothing is worth tarnishing your integrity for — and that’s one of the most important (lessons) I carry with me, and I actually repeat it to people.

“I did get to hear his voice, and I had him in my corner,” Robson continues. “He was my best friend. A lot of these younger kids didn’t have that at all, so being able to even share with them some of the things my dad said is incredibly rewarding.”

His father’s influence is one of the reasons the younger Robson began working with Tuesday’s Children several years ago — and why he instinctively knelt to tell little Robert Spencer that, he, too, lost his father at Cantor Fitzgerald on that awful day in September.

“He hadn’t known,” Robson says of the dark-haired boy in the Yankees cap, and wearing orange sandals. “He probably just looked at me like I was an old man, but I saw in his eyes he was shocked.”

Then, something beautiful.

“As we were walking towards the mound, he grabbed my forearm, and that was a moment that pretty much erased everyone else in the stadium for me.

“I felt, I really felt, like I was walking out there with just him and both our dads. It was incredible.”