Children of 9/11 Responders Visit Mets Dugout

By Kerry Murakami

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David Pokress Anthony Vanaria, right, uses his cell phone camera to snap a photo in the Mets dugout as Chris Gardner checks out the bat rack.

For Chris Gardner , who lost his father on 9/11, the visit to the Mets dugout, featuring private meetings with star players, was more than just a fun outing.

"It takes your mind off things," said Gardner, 17, a junior at Oceanside High School.

After more than a decade, Gardner said he still thinks about his dad, FDNY firefighter Thomas Gardner, every day.

Chris Gardner smiled as he stood in the dugout at Citi Field before the Mets game with the Miami Marlins yesterday afternoon with 14-year-old Anthony Vanaria III of Yonkers.

Vanaria's father, a retired FDNY lieutenant, has suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder and chronic respiratory problems, both linked to his role in helping search for remains at Ground Zero.

The event, part of Take Our Daughters and Sons to Work Day, was organized by the nonprofit Tuesday's Children, created after the terror attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, to help child victims cope with the tragedy.

"This is why we do this," said Amy Wright, Tuesday's Children development director, who accompanied the boys to the ballpark. "To see these smiles on their faces."

In the dugout, the teens clutched autographed batting gloves. Gardner described himself as a casual fan -- although he said his grandfather was an usher at Shea Stadium for 40 years.

Vanaria was more star-struck. He pointed at a dried wad of gum on the bench and said, "That could have been [third baseman] David Wright's."

His father, Anthony Vanaria Jr., said the years after the terror attacks have been difficult for him and his family. "They went through a lot of worrying and anxiety," he said.

But thoughts Thursday were on Mets baseball.

Mets pitcher Dillon Gee , whose father is a firefighter in Texas , stopped by to chat, asking where the teens went to school.

Outfielder Mike Baxter , whose mother is an FDNY secretary, dropped in, followed by pitchers Tim Byrdak
and
Bobby Parnell
, whose dad is a fire chief in
North Carolina
.

"Come with me," Parnell said, taking the teens on to the field.

Vanaria, eyes wide, fired off a quick text to his dad.

"OMG," it read.