From the porch

A side trip toward tolerance

By BRADLEY A. MARTIN

The visit to the site of the World Trade Center, which makes up the largest piece of reporting in this week’s newspaper, was really a side trip.

Mainly, Alice and I went north to examine the quality of the pig being roasted at the home of my brother, Neil, in rural New Jersey. I know 100 people who can attest that it was one more fine product. But as the weekend trip to my hometown approached, it occurred to me that we would have just enough time to head up to New York City and see the site of the terrorist attack that’s now nine years gone. No driving: take the ferry for 40 minutes, then a 2D-minute walk up past Wall Street.

Prompting me, as well, was the recent controversy over a planned mosque a couple of blocks from the site of the destruction. Sounded like a lot of hoo-haw to me—and the whole thing is still up in the air—but I became curious about what has become a focal point about religion.

The walk to the heart of Manhattan was a pleasure on a sunny Saturday morning, despite the permanent police presence in front of the New York Stock Exchange and other major financial buildings, where permanent blockades keep vehicles from getting too close.

The 16-acre site of the World Trade Center is fenced off, with more security in place, but that is for construction safety—and has done absolutely nothing to discourage visitors to the area. We walked all the way around the place—partly on the tour led by Brian and Cindy Branco, partly on our own—and what we found was an endless flow of somber but agreeable people. There are temporary museums marking the attack itself and the memorial projects now underway. You can spend a long time in St. Paul’s Church, the 238-year-old worship place where firemen rested, where photos of the missing victims are still displayed and where makeshift memorials have been compiled.

Inside the site, work crews are hard at it. One new business skyscraper was finished four years ago, the Freedom Tower is about 55 stories into a 190-floor project; the waterfalls that will mark the footprints of the original twin towers of the original plan and the first of 400 trees have been planted.

We stopped to ask one security guard the work schedule: seven days, 24 hours, he said. Quite a tribute by itself.

Our tour guides made another point about the place: despite the horrific losses, 17,000 people lived through the day to tell about it. Hope, in that.

By the time we’d made it around the big block, my interest in seeing where a mosque might be built had waned. Controversy? Not here. We saw no protests; no signs; not even any skateboarders, boomboxes or loudness of any kind.

Instead, plenty of hot dog and pretzel vendors; several sellers of strawberry smoothies; tables loaded with everything you could want in an “I Love New York” style. And the rest of us: families and friends, kids and couples visiting a place that will be honored for all time.

Despite the bustle, the whole place was a peace park. I can only imagine what the crowds will be like next September, when the museum and the footprint waterfalls are completed and opened—but I know what the mood will be like.

Somber, reverent.

Much noise is now being made over the mosque and its appropriateness, the link being that any observance of Islam is inappropriate because of the actions of 19 of its most wayward followers on September 11, 2001. But this country was settled by people seeking religious tolerance, a pillar that was built deep into the American infrastructure. Surely we cannot move that pillar, and threaten the foundation, because of 19 people.

A shrine where the major attack occurred—where 2,749 people were killed on a single day—serves legitimate purpose only if it is a monument to the memories of those who perished; if it promotes reflection about what happened; and if it urges peace.

Followers of every religion can intersect at those points. I hope all believers can find the tolerance to make the trip. Heaven help us if the biggest part of us—Christian, Jew, Moslem, Hindu—cannot.

Hickman County