

Hannah Johansson stood at the lectern in front of 300 people staring at her, waiting for her to say something heartfelt and meaningful. She looked around the room. A room that was unfamiliar to her even though she'd been in it thousands of times. But that was when it was the multipurpose room at the Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge. She played in the large barn-like structure as a child with her dolls and toys and electric trains. She practiced her jumpshot here when her father put up a hoop after she made her junior high team. And when she was a little older, it was where she came when she needed to be alone with her thoughts and her guitar.

But the room that Hannah knew was gone. It was now the Axel Johansson Memorial Auditorium, renamed to honor her father's memory.

Every seat was filled. The first two rows were reserved for relatives and VIPs. Hannah's aunt Gilda and cousins Catherine and Phillip were sitting in the middle of the front row, flanked by officials from the Mayor's Office, the New York City Parks Department, the National Parks Service and local assemblymen and state senators. The second row held representatives from a half-dozen environmental organizations including the Sierra Club, the National Audubon Society and the World Wildlife Fund.

The rest of the packed hall was crammed with children from neighborhood schools, birdwatching enthusiasts from all over the city and beyond, and men and women of all ages and ethnicities who loved the beauty and tranquility of the Refuge and wanted to show their appreciation and gratitude for the man who created and nurtured it.

Michael Leigh, the president of the east coast chapter of the National Environmental Conservancy and the organizer of the event, had just finished the last of a dozen tributes to her father, the man who transformed a rat infested, garbage strewn swamp into one of New York City's environmental treasures.

Before Leigh left the stage he said, "Our final speaker, Superintendent Johansson's daughter Hannah, would like to say a few words."

On one side of the podium an easel held a portrait of her father in his khaki superintendent's uniform, surrounded by a snowy egret, a great blue heron and a glossy ibis, painted by the celebrated wildlife artist Arthur Singer. On the other side was a wrought iron plant stand, but in place of a plant it held a hand-enameled aluminum urn containing her father's ashes.

Tiny pearls of sweat formed on Hannah's forehead. She gripped the lectern for support.

“Thank you all for coming,” she said, fighting to maintain composure. “I know my father meant a lot to you. He meant everything to me. He was my hero. My mentor. My best friend. I loved him more than I could ever possibly say.”

Her face contorted. Her eyes welled up.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry I killed him,” she wailed.