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Police Commissioner Raymond W. Kelly announced further efforts to return jewelry found at ground zero.

From 9/11 Rubble, Unclaimed Mementos

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Of the thousands of items salvaged from the World Trade Center disaster – children’s photographs and melted credit cards, paperweights and plaques – the families who come to the property room at Police Headquarters are most often in search of one thing: wedding rings, golden symbols of infinity. The next most popular items are watches and earrings, necklaces and bracelets – precious objects intended to last, albeit not amid ashes.

To find them, the families bring receipts, hand-drawn pictures, insurance papers, even souvenir wedding videotapes. Still, only about half the 1,350 pieces of jewelry from the World Trade Center have been returned to survivors or their next of kin, compared with about 72 percent of the 26,799 items collected in all. Yesterday, the Police Department unveiled a database that allows people to use the Internet to submit claims for what is left. Within an hour, the police said, 17 had been filed, from as far away as Arizona and Ohio.

The database is part of an extraordinary effort by city agencies to ensure that any identifiable remnant from the disaster site is restored to its rightful owner. At the Fresh Kills landfill, debris removed from the site was manually sifted for personal items and human remains. At the medical examiner’s office, new tests were developed for deteriorated DNA, and a method was invented to preserve body parts that may be identified in the future. The Police Department has also had 8,000 tattered photographs digitally restored, and the Port Authority hopes to have them on view on a secure Internet site by the end of this year so that families can reclaim the originals.

“We are committed to returning this property to its rightful owners in a respectful and a dignified way,” Police Commissioner Raymond W. Kelly said yesterday at a news conference held to announce the jewelry database. “It is an obligation that we have, and we want to see it through to the end.”

The items range in condition from perfect to unrecognizable, said Inspector Jack J. Trabit, the commanding officer of the property clerk division. They were recovered from three places: the World Trade Center site, Fresh Kills and the city morgue. Inspector Trabit said that the transfer of the objects was an emotional affair. “It affects every family almost the same way,” he said. “It relives the moment for them, it brings back memories of their lost loved ones, and then they run the gamut between mourning and closure.”

Yet many people have been hesitant to take the step of reclaiming the belongings of their loved ones. Now, nearly four years after the attack, there are still people trickling into the property room, where they are ushered into a private area for World Trade Center victims and their families. “Sometimes they’ve just built up the courage to come down,” said Michael Henley, an evidence and property control specialist who spends as much as two hours with each family. “I’ll sit down with them, they’ll tell me about the family, they’ll show me pictures. A lot of them just really want to talk.”

After each initial visit to the property room, Mr. Henley sorts through the items to see if any match the description offered. The new database, developed with help from the department’s own gemologist and experts at Tiffany & Company, streamlines that process. It provides a standardized way for people to describe a piece of jewelry, from its brand or inscription to the number, type and shape of any gemstones. If there is anything in the inventory that matches a description, the claimant may be sent an e-mail message with a photograph of the item. But the jewelry itself is not on view on the Web site, <http://www.nyc.gov/html/nypd/html/wtcproperty/home.html>, to prevent fraudulent claims. Any disputes or conflicting claims will be resolved in state court, Mr. Kelly said. The Internet claims process will be available until May 31, 2005.

The effort to return small items has at times reached heroic proportions. Anna Mojica, a homemaker in Bellmore, N.Y., raising two children, said she received a gold chain her husband had worn, as well as the keys to his car and house. Manuel Mojica, 37, was a firefighter. He did not wear his wedding ring on the job.

Beth McErlean, a homemaker in Larchmont, N.Y., raising four children, said she had not been aware of the property-return program. Her husband, John McErlean, 39, was a partner at Cantor Fitzgerald. “I’d love to get back his wedding ring,” she said. “It has his initials and my initials and the date we got married: 1987, on Sept. 12.”

But some people seemed not quite ready, still, for the sorrowful errand of recovery. Grace Alviar, a financial services representative at a hospital, said she had not received her husband’s wedding ring, gold necklace or the gold Rolex she gave him as a present for Christmas and his 50th birthday.

But, she said, when it comes to the World Trade Center attack, she has trouble following through. “Every day is 9/11 for me,” said Mrs. Alviar, who has three children. “I don’t bother with Thanksgiving or Christmas or New Year’s any more. I just want the day to pass by.”

Anthony Ramirez contributed reporting for this article.