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LAKELAKE Magazine

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07.11

Freedom is not "FREE"

Local Veterans in the Adopt-A-Kid, Adopt-A-Vet program show and teach children what veterans mean to the United States.

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LAKELAKE Magazine
www.TheLAKEMagazine.net
July 2011
Volume 14, Number 7





PEOPLE

Local Veterans in the Adopt-A-Kid, Adopt-A-Vet program show and teach children what veterans mean to the United States.

Written by **Blair Townley**
Photos Provided

It all began with a question asked by a teenager to veterans holding a POWs (Prisoner of War) fundraiser in The Villages — “Does POWs stand for People Out of Work?” What emerged from that question has led to countless children learning about the sacrifices of America’s brave veterans along with a bond built forever between veterans and children.

The program, Adopt-A-Kid, Adopt-A-Vet, brings veterans to elementary schools in the tri-county area to tell students about their branch and years of service, concluding with the students writing an essay about their veteran’s service.

The hope is that children will learn more about wars that shaped their country while recognizing the efforts made by the nation’s beloved veterans.

“The veterans just love the program because it’s great to see these kids get acquainted with all these branches of service,” says Harold Sievers, Korean War veteran and President of the Veterans’ Memorial Park Association in The Villages.

“Now they know about veterans and are respectful towards them.”

History Through Their Stories

The program, started by The Veterans’ Memorial Park founder Frank Mezzatesta, was first introduced to

fourth graders at The Villages Elementary School in 1999.

At present, around 4,240 students have participated in the program in its almost 12-year history, having since expanded to include fourth and fifth grade.

Typically veterans visit the children at their schools. One veteran is placed with every group of three to five children.

The veterans become designated as the children’s “veteran,” talking about their service experience and showing artifacts/photos while answering their questions.

Some children, veterans have noticed, are more aware of wars than in previous years due to family members actively serving overseas, as mentioned by retired US Navy Lieutenant Commander Fran Pagliarulo.

“It is becoming more common to have a brother or a cousin that is or was in Iraq and/or Afghanistan,” he recalls.

“I try to help them understand why the soldiers are there and for them to write to them and pray for them. I

“ It may seem very unusual to see a veteran and a fourth grader coming together but it's not unusual now for some young man or woman to come over and thank me for my service. It shows me that what we veterans did we didn't do in vain. ”

tell them how important mail is to a veteran and how exciting it is to receive something from home.”

The children in each group would then write an essay describing “their” veteran’s service, with awards given by the Veteran Memorial Park Association for exceptional essays.

Another reward of the program is the opportunity for the winning essay writers to read their essay out loud to veterans and their classmates at the Veterans’ Memorial Park in The Villages.

Charter school students who win scholarships from the Association for their essays get the chance to read their essays at the Park during the Park’s Fourth of July celebration.

The park events allow veterans to meet again with “their” children to reminisce about their time together and sometimes receive thanks again for their service.

“It may seem very unusual to see a veteran and a fourth grader coming together but it’s not unusual now for some young man or woman to come over and thank me for my service. It shows me that what we veterans did we didn’t do in vain,” Harold concludes.

“Adoptive” Grandparents

Although the program was created to teach children about their nation’s history, Adopt-a-Kid, Adopt-a-Vet has helped to building lasting friendships between the retired veterans and young children.

Both Harold and Fran mention that several of their past “children” have stayed connected

with “their” veterans and have even invited them to graduations, sports games and other activities. Harold was even made an honorary assistant coach of a local soccer team, attending every game with his “Mr. Harold” uniformed T-shirt.

“I communicate with many of them by email, or send them cards for their birthdays and Christmas,” adds Fran, who has been with the program with Harold since its inception.

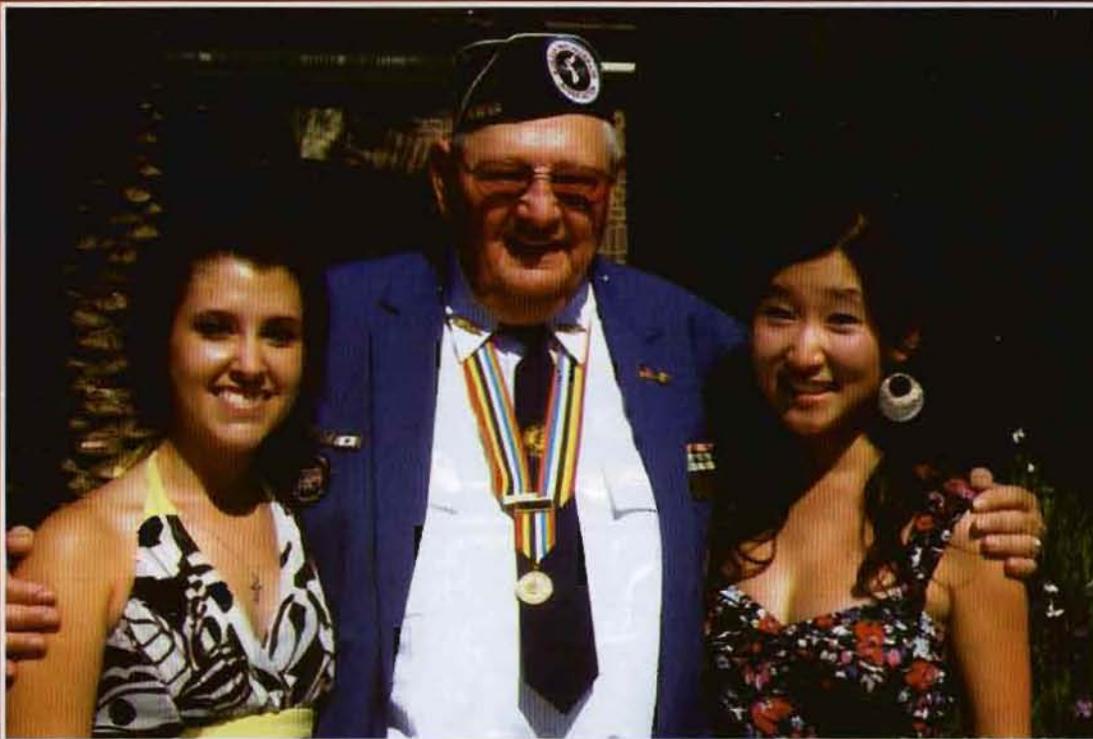
“They all respond with a thank you and how they remember and enjoyed our relationships. I think that it’s unanimous throughout the group that we become adopted granddads or grandmoms to these kids.”

What is more significant is seeing their lessons impact the children and change their perspectives towards veterans.

“I was at the soccer field in my DAV uniform and was walking back to my car when a little 12-year-old girl stopped me. She extended her hand and said, ‘I want to thank you for your service to our country.’ It’s what we teach to the kids to say when they see a veteran,” Harold says.

Seeing the benefits of the program come to life has encouraged the Veterans’ Memorial Park Association to continue with Adopt-a-Kid, Adopt-a-Vet, even noticing other veteran organizations in and outside of Florida taking part in the program.

It’s about teaching more children uninformed about their nation’s history that freedom is not free, but a sacrificial gift brought forth by courageous veterans. ■



Top photo: Harold Sievers with two of his "children."

Remaining photos: Several meetings of veterans with local students.

