

Advertisement:



Field of Honor to connect local, military history this Memorial Day weekend



By Jeff Danna TribLocal reporter May 24 at 12:05 p.m.



Cantor Kim Harris of Temple Beth-El shows off pictures of her son, Nathan Harris, 24, who is in the Marines. (Jeff Danna, Tribune reporter)

Judy Michalak was 16 when her older brother, Jay Healey, was killed in the Vietnam War.

It was the same war that claimed the lives of nearly a dozen Northbrook residents, including another young man who lived in the same neighborhood as the Healey family. Each loss was unsettling to the tight-knit community that was still a few years away from expanding into the large suburb it is today.

“It was like, God, how many kids from the neighborhood are they going to take?” said Michalak, who now lives in Mundelein. “At that time, Northbrook was such a small town. Everybody knew everybody.”

Michalak’s brother is just one of the people who will be honored this Memorial Day weekend in Northbrook’s Field of Honor. Beginning Thursday, the Village Green will be filled with 1,901 flags recognizing those who have served in the armed forces — both survivors and the fallen.

It’s shaping up to be one of the larger Memorial Day celebrations Northbrook has seen, in part because it also ties in with the 110th anniversary of the incorporation of the village as Shermerville, said organizer Judy Hughes, president of the Northbrook Historical Society. The 1,901 flags also will represent the year, 1901, that the village was incorporated.

But mainly, the Field of Honor is a way to get back to Memorial Day’s roots. Today, Memorial Day weekend has become the unofficial kickoff for summer, with people more interested in grilling and baseball than honoring America’s fallen soldiers, Hughes said.

“I don’t think it’s that people have forgotten,” she said.

But joining the armed forces isn’t as big a part of life in Northbrook these days. Although America is involved in wars in the Middle East, the impact isn’t necessarily felt closer to home. Hughes, whose father was in the military, echoed Michalak’s sentiment that Northbrook’s growth has contributed to the disconnect.

It was a “sparsely attended” local Veterans Day ceremony that made Hughes realize she wanted to help the community reconnect with its military history. Driving home with her husband, she heard a story on the radio about what was called a “healing field” in Naperville, and she was inspired.

“I turned to (my husband) and said, “That’s what we need to do in Northbrook on Memorial Day,”” Hughes said.

The community was eager to help. Northbrook resident and Vietnam War veteran Jim Hughes purchased a flag to plant in the field that will honor Don Rion, a friend with whom he served who did not return home to Northbrook. He was killed by friendly fire, Jim Hughes said.

"I wanted to honor Don's memory," he said "At this point in time, it's the least I can do. ... (The event) brings to the attention of people the sacrifice some of our Northbrook residents and service men made."

He added that the George W. Benjamin American Legion Post 791, with which he is involved, has helped sell flags for the Field of Honor at its fish fry dinners.

Judy Hughes also reached out to local clergy, whom she asked to speak at the Village Green. Among those who are scheduled to speak is Cantor Kim Harris of Temple Beth-El, whose son, Nathan Harris, is preparing for his third tour of duty with the Marines in Afghanistan.

Sitting in the temple's library with photos of her son — including some from his wedding in North Carolina last year — she fought back tears as she talked about him and the meaning of the upcoming holiday.

"Every Memorial Day, I think, maybe the next one he'll be the one we're memorializing," she said.

Some people today, she said, seem to look down on the armed forces and view someone's decision to join as a necessity rather than a personal choice. For Nathan Harris, being a Marine has helped him mature, his mother said, speaking with pride about her son.

She contrasted present-day attitudes about the nation's military efforts with those of past generations.

"In World War II, the whole country was invested in the effort," she said. "Everyone made sacrifices. You just don't have that feeling anymore."

But Judy Hughes promises that the Field of Honor will be more than just a somber Memorial Day event. Musical acts are scheduled to perform each night, and the traditional parade will make its way through the village on Monday.

Plus, Hughes said, it's not just about honoring armed services members. The flags will recognize the efforts of teachers, fire fighters, police officers and other people who have made a difference in the community.

"It's everyday heroes, too," Hughes said. "You don't have to have served in the military."

And with the village's anniversary to celebrate, the Field of Honor could bring military history into the context of local history. Former Northbrook resident Michalak noted that the village's Memorial Day events have been held in the same place where people like her brother played baseball and hung out as children.

The Field of Honor could remind residents that one person's loss is the entire community's loss.

"It's just a reminder that these are kids from your town," Michalak said. "These people did the same things, they went to the same high school. It could be any little town in the United States. It is any little town in the United States."