



The healing continues

Jason Gabak Special to The Citizen | Posted: Saturday, February 5, 2011 3:00 am

When St. Joseph School decided to spearhead the Healing Field project last Memorial Day weekend, it was hard to anticipate the impact it would have on the Auburn community.

More than 1,250 people had a flag at Hoopes Park commemorating those they have lost, as well as important events and milestones in people's lives. It was a moving and effective sight that stirred emotions in the community.

"We had no idea how this would affect people," said Kathleen Coye, principal of St. Joseph and a member of the Healing Field committee. "But people were very moved by it, and it got people talking and sharing stories. I think that was what was so great about it, it gave people an opportunity to talk and share their stories. We were very pleased to be a part of that."

Cheryl Foster, a parent of a St. Joseph student, first saw a Healing Field in Waterloo. Darlene Nila, chairperson of this year's Healing Field committee, said that Foster was very moved by what she saw and brought the idea back to Auburn.

"Her father was a vet," Nila said. "He had been in World War II, I believe, and she was very moved. It was very emotional for her to see all the flags and she thought it was something we could do here."

Coye said that the idea was brought back to St. Joseph, where it was agreed the school would be interested in supporting the project and bringing it to the community.

Initially, the plan had been for the event to be a one-time effort, but after the strong positive response from last year, the school and committee decided to bring the Healing Field back again this year.

"People just responded so well," Coye said. "There was so much interest and so many people contacted us and wanted to be a part of it but didn't have the opportunity to do it last year, so we felt it was something that we should do again."

This year, St. Joseph is making every effort to reach as many people as possible. One of the first steps in that process is a sale of commemorative note cards, featuring photos by John Francis McCarthy of last year's Healing Field, to help raise funds for this year's event.

"People have responded really well to the cards," Coye said. "People have been buying them as gifts and sending them to friends and family; that has been really nice to see."

Coye said that the school is also making an effort to get the students more involved not only with the flags, but also the meaning behind them.

"We want the students to be more involved," Coye said. "We had a guest speaker, Mary McLaughlin, who came to speak to the students about what the Healing Field means. We think that it is important for them to understand what this is about."

McLaughlin, originally from Virginia, lost her son, Sgt. Christopher Simpson, in Iraq in 2008. Nila said that hearing the stories of people like McLaughlin helps to demonstrate to the students what an event like the Healing Field represents.

This year, during Memorial Day weekend, flags will again fly at Hoopes Park, from Friday through Monday. Nila said that like last year, flags can represent any special person or event.

"We had people who bought them for vets," Nila said. "Or people they lost. But they can also stand for special events, like engagements or graduations. We had people who bought them for teachers. Anything that is special."

The event will also be extended to East Middle School to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the Sept. 11 attacks on the Friday before the anniversary. Coye said that people will have the opportunity to have flags at both locations, and the plan is to have a flag for every person who lost their life at Ground Zero — approximately 3,000 — at each during the commemorative ceremony. At Hoopes Park, the flags will also be divided into three areas of tribute: Tower 1, Tower 2 and the Pentagon. Anyone who purchases flags for the Memorial Day Healing Field can either take possession of them afterward, or keep them with the committee for display in the Sept. 11 field as well. Either way, donors can ultimately take their flags home.

Nila said that this is a joint effort between the school; Terry Winslow, formerly of the Auburn Fire Department; and Detective Shawn Butler of the Auburn Police Department.

“They asked us to be a part of the Sept. 11 ceremony,” Nila said. “They had seen what we did last year, and asked us to be a part of what they are doing.”

It was an opportunity that Coye believes will be important for all involved, from students to the Auburn community as a whole.

“After having the Healing Field last year,” Coye said, “we were asked if we wanted to be part of the Sept. 11 event. We thought about how much it would mean to the community and what it would do for people, and it was something we definitely wanted to be a part of.”