



Healing field brings solemn reflection

Kelly Voll The Citizen | Posted: Saturday, May 28, 2011 3:30 am

AUBURN — Larry Drown still recalls being spit on by war protesters during his return to the United States in 1970, when the Vietnam War and opposition to it were raging.

He was at the O'Hare International Airport in Chicago and said he remembers people spitting on anyone in uniform.

Friday night, he was in a completely different setting, receiving an applause and a standing ovation for his service at the Healing Field: Field of Hopes and Dreams. In its second year in Hoopes Park, Auburn, the field of flags grew from 1,200 last year to 2,200 this year. Each flag had a name on it — someone who gave his or her life for the U.S. or any other person, living or deceased.

“I think it’s great to see the community supporting veterans,” Drown said. “In the Vietnam War, there was a lot of public dislike of the war. ... Now the country is reacting the way they should to veterans and Auburn is a great example.”

Drown, an Auburn native who now lives in Benton, Ky., came to Auburn to visit family and see the Healing Field.

Like Drown, hundreds of others came to watch the Healing Field’s opening ceremony, which was sponsored by St. Joseph School and will benefit the school.

The evening, although chilly and rainy, featured patriotic songs, speeches expressing gratitude by local and state officials, fireworks and many tributes and recognition for those who have died fighting for America.

“It’s touching,” said Beatrice Leonardi, who married a U.S. soldier and moved here from Paris, France, 49 years ago. She became a citizen 25 years ago.

“I’m a new American,” she said, laughing at how long she’s been here. “This makes me feel more American.”

Her daughter-in-law, Johanna Leonardi, a native of Peru, also married an American and came to the U.S. to live. She’s been here nearly two years. She said the song, “Bring Me Home,” performed at the ceremony by singer Andy Cooney, was very moving.

“I am very proud of this country,” she said.

Several city, county and state officials, as well as religious dignitaries, spoke about pride in the U.S. and the gratitude everyone should feel toward those who sacrificed their lives and those who are away from their families in harm’s way for months at a time.

Of the 2,200 flags in the park, 458 of them were donated by the Auburn company Medent in honor of each Cayuga County resident who gave his or her life in foreign wars since World War I.

The woman who started the Healing Field last year, Cheryl Foster, said she was first inspired by seeing another Healing Field in Waterloo four years ago. Her father served in the U.S. Air Force and her niece and nephew attend St. Joseph School. The Healing Field in Hoopes Park is the result of her dream.

Auburn Mayor Michael Quill proclaimed the day Cheryl Foster Day in Auburn, giving a speech about her devotion to community service.

Stella White, who came from Dallas, Ga., to see the Healing Field, lived in Auburn before moving south nine years ago. She said she came because of Foster and what she does for the community. White was Foster’s teacher years ago.

“It’s very attractive, patriotic, very well-thought-out,” White said. “It’s very symbolic for the veterans. I think people should be very proud.”

Staff writer Kelly Voll can be reached at 282-2239 or kelly.voll@lee.net. Follow her on Twitter at CitizenVoll.