VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS.

Investing in America's Future

From baseball to Boy Scouts, VFW boasts a rich record of supporting youth activities that promote civic service, good sportsmanship and patriotism.

Jul 05, 2009

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Some of VFW's earliest ties to the community involved youth-oriented endeavors. From the first Boy Scout troop partnership in 1915 to the creation of a national youth program in 1937, VFW has long been committed to addressing the welfare of America's youth.

At the inception of the national youth program, Victor E. Devereaux, director of the Americanism Department (now under Programs), called it "the most important mission the VFW has undertaken since the memorable days of the World War."

Though time has passed, youth programs remain a vital part of VFW community efforts today. Through a number of critical programs, VFW maintains its rich tradition of supporting youth activities that cultivate values of civic service, good sportsmanship and love of country.

Scouts Honor
VFW's first foray into supporting youth activities still remains an active partnership. Last year, 44 VFW departments participated in Scouting in some way, and more than 1,400 Posts sponsored Scouting troops. VFW also annually awards two Scout of the Year scholarships. First place is $5,000 and second place is $3,000.

In 2007, twin brothers from Marco Island, Fla., embarked upon an ambitious plan to become Eagle Scouts: erecting a veterans memorial in the Marco Island Cemetery. They had a special reason: Joseph and Vincent Giannone's grand¬father fought in WWII and their great-grandfather fought in WWI.

"This project is a service to the veterans in our community," wrote Joseph and Vincent in an

e-mail requesting donations. “Through con¬¬versations with our dad when we were little boys, we came to realize that this would be a great Eagle Scout project.”

The brothers were successful. The memorial, which cost approximately $20,000, was erected on July 2, 2007. Post 6370 on Marco Island donated $500 to the cause, and, according to the brothers’ grandfather, Vincent, “gave the boys plenty of guidance.”
“This memorial is certainly not about my brother, myself or our Eagle Scout badges,”

Joseph wrote in an e-mail thanking donors.
“It is about honoring all the dedicated men and women who made the ultimate sacrifice defending our great country in order to help preserve our freedom and way of life. Memorial Day is, and should always be, about these men and women.”

Another Eagle Scout recently wrote to VFW to recognize the contributions Post 11519 in Woon¬socket, R.I., had made to his project. The Post had been a sponsor of Brian Cotnoir’s troop and former Cub Scout Pack for his entire Scouting career. He and members of the Post had been placing flags on the graves in four local cemeteries every year since he had been a Scout.

“With the help of Post 11519, I was able to raise the funds necessary to purchase 200 medallions that have been attached to the gravestones of deceased veterans in my town,” he wrote in a November 2008 letter. The medallions placed on the gravestones have a U.S. flag on the front and are engraved with the words “Thank you for your faithful service.”

This way, Cotnoir explained, in¬stead of flags giving way to wear-and-tear, veterans “are assured to always be honored.”

Cotnoir was grateful for the support of his local Post. “I am proud to be associated with this organization for all it and all VFW Posts across the country stand for,” he said.

In Grangeville, Idaho, Cub Scout Marcus Gravatt assisted VFW in replacing 100 U.S. flags used to line the main street of Grangeville during holidays and special events. This was in addition to writing an essay on patriotism and learning all of the verses to the “Star-Spangled Banner.”

John White, commander of Post 10052 in Chesire, Conn., explains the importance of VFW’s connection to Scouting this way: “Scouting is one of the most valuable experiences boys can have, and it is wholly in line with two important objectives of ours: youth education and Americanism.

“Here in America, Scouting has done more than any other youth activity to develop patriotism, fitness and leadership skills in children, along with sound character, self-

reliance, and intelligent understanding of the history and civic functioning of our nation."

Junior Military Training
Some VFW Posts also are actively in¬volved with the local Junior Reserve Officers Training Corps (JROTC). One such Post is 11355 in Council Bluffs, Iowa. It has been a supp¬orter since the local high school started the program 12 years ago.

"Besides supplying the JRTOC with certificates and medals from the supply catalogue, our Post and Auxiliary have solicited the help of the entire Department of Iowa and its Ladies Auxiliary. On average, they donate between $2,000 to $3,000 per year," says Charles Land, Post 11355 quartermaster.

"We also help them with fundraisers so cadets can attend national drill meets,"

Land says. "We've had spaghetti feeds, pancake feeds and other fundraisers for them along with another VFW Post in town."
Land says the values and skills taught in JROTC programs in high school are invaluable.

"A drill team is never better than the worst member on the team," he says. "The kids learn at an early age that rather than bullying a person who is behind, or making fun of that person, to help that person to build a better team. That's something they can carry throughout their lives, especially into the job sector.

"They learn the values of friendship and camaraderie. Plus, they learn about veterans and veterans organizations. These kids have a tremendous respect for veterans."

Shooting Sports
VFW Posts also sponsor local National Rifle Association shooting clubs. William Thompson, commander of Post 3019 in Three Rivers, Mich., explained that while a Post needn't supply any funds in order to sponsor a club, his Post did contribute a donation for equipment to the team it sponsored in 2007.

"We also got involved with their awards ceremony," Thompson says. "Every Sunday afternoon the kids meet and shoot at targets. They send them in, and about six months' worth are scored. Then the teams with the highest scores are invited to Ohio for a national shoot. Our team was invited last year."

Thompson says members of his Post are proud to support structured youth activities in their local community.

Minnesota Ice Hockey
Perhaps no more popular structured youth activity exists than organized sports.

Minnesota is unique within VFW in its statewide sponsorship of a youth ice hockey league. Now in its 54th year, the VFW Bantam League has provided countless boys ages 14 and 15 with the opportunity to display their skills in what is perhaps the nation's fastest-moving team sport.

Minnesota Department Adjutant/Quartermaster Jim Hesselgrave estimates approximately 70-80 Bantam "A" teams are sponsored by VFW Posts statewide. He also says that up to 95 Posts sponsor hockey on one level or another (including girls' teams).

Hasselgrave says Minnesota's involvement in hockey is a natural fit. "It's just what VFW Posts, districts and departments are supposed to do: sponsor community youth programs and perform community service," he says. "It's a way of gaining visibility within the local and state communities."

Play Ball
In the same vein, a state baseball tournament is hosted by the Department of South Dakota every year.

It includes 40 teams, each a divisional champion in the state's seven regions, plus five teams representing divisions in the host city. VFW sponsors the regional tournaments during the third week of July that send winning teams to the state contest.

South Dakota's VFW sponsored 191 teams in 2008. Fifty-two out of 67 Posts provide baseball sponsorships across the state. This year marks the program's 50th anniversary.

Adjutant/Quartermaster Rick W. Barg couldn't be more pleased. "We've had more than 3,000 players this year in our program," he says. "And we've had some firsts again: we started a major and minor class this year in the AA varsity and the Colman State Champs at the B varsity level had a young woman on their team."

For Barg, baseball is vitally important to South Dakota, not just for the players but for the department as well.

"If we quit baseball, it would kill our membership," he said. "The absence of strong youth sports activities hurts departments. Our program is known throughout the state. It's great publicity for VFW."

In Wisconsin, Post 9060 in Prescott, some 20 miles east of St. Paul, Minn., started a Challenger League in 1997, an officially sanctioned division of Little League for disabled children, ages 5 to 19. All ages play on the same team. The weekly two-inning games usually last around two hours. In keeping with the spirit of the league, teams don't keep score.

"Every kid gets a chance to bat," said William Bowen, quartermaster of Post 9060. "Coaches and parents set up rules for their own leagues."

Players in the Challenger League have "buddies" that accompany them on the field, if necessary. Some players are confined to wheelchairs, so buddies help them field balls or push them to bases after the player hits a pitch. Bowen said the Challenger League offers more for parents than perhaps any other sports league.

"This is not a league where you can just dump off your kids at the ball field," he said. "In the end, I think this is great therapy for the parents. They talk among themselves about schools and other important issues. There's a lot of discussion about the unique challenges they and their children face."

No matter the endeavor, VFW departments, districts and Posts across the country invest time, money and care into youth activities for American children—and surely reap the rewards of these investments as those children mature.

Freedoms Foundation
Each year, the Freedoms Foundation hosts VFW Voice of Democracy winners at Valley Forge, near Philadelphia. The Freedoms Foundation is designed to promote responsible citizenship and reawaken the spirit of U.S. patriotism. Now in its 61st year, the Freedoms Foundation annually educates more than 4,000 students and presents some 35 high school programs.

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