

‘We Wanted to Do Something Special’

A VFW Post in Wisconsin began hosting veterans from nursing homes for a meal and recognition for their service annually on Veterans Day

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More than 14 years ago, members of VFW Post 2112 in Sparta, Wisconsin, sought to remedy a discrepancy in how veterans of varying generations received recognition.

It began with a cold realization by Post 2112 Chaplain Tom Schauer. He noticed local restaurants offered veterans a free meal on Veterans Day, but they did not extend such an option to those relegated to nursing homes.

In wanting to extend the same level of honor and respect for those on the precipice of rejoining loved ones and comrades-in-arms beyond this world, Schauer crafted a plan to pull those elderly veterans off the fringes of neglect.

“Across America, restaurants offer a free meal to veterans on Veterans Day, but we at the Post recognized that veterans in nursing homes really did not get to enjoy this recognition,” Schauer said. “So we began to bring these veterans to the Post for a luncheon, where they not only got a free meal but were properly recognized for his or her service to America.”

What began in 2008 as a small luncheon for older veterans in nursing homes later morphed into something bigger by 2011, when Schauer recommended involving local youths during a Post meeting held to brainstorm ways to recruit new volunteers.

“I was a middle school teacher at the time and suggested that we involve youth,” Schauer said. “I spoke to the middle school student council advisor and asked to get them really involved with veterans. She agreed, and 15 student council representatives became part of our day’s event.”

With the suggestion becoming a reality, the annual Veterans Day luncheon now includes students from local schools in and around Sparta, as well as active-duty Army troops stationed at nearby Fort McCoy in Wisconsin. The volunteers help greet, set tables, serve

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food and clean up. In turn, the volunteers get to sit with the veterans to share a meal and hear their stories of sacrifice, valor and duty to the country.

“We at the Post have a feeling of pride that we are able to provide something special that most confined veterans do not receive,” Schauer said. “We are also extremely proud to be able to connect veterans with young people in the community. We even have had kids helping who met a grandpa they were not aware was a veteran.”

Though Post 2112 had to cancel the 2020 and 2021 luncheons due to COVID-19 restrictions that did not allow nursing home veterans to leave the premises, Schauer and Post members have since pivoted to continue to provide recognition.

“We are working with the homes now to see if the residents will be able to join us at the Post this year, but we are also researching diverse ways to provide gifts if the COVID restrictions continue,” Schauer said. “That is how we came up with the blanket gifts idea last year. We wanted to do something special, even if we could not bring the veterans to the Post.”

The luncheon is slated to take place at Post 2112 this year, though Schauer and members of the Post also will conduct several other annual events in observance of Veterans Day.

“The honor luncheon is conducted in addition to presenting the colors at three to four different school Veterans Day programs,” Schauer said. “We also conduct a community Veterans Day program at Memorial Park [in Sparta]. Sunshine, snow or cold, more often than not, we always do something.”

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