

A place of honor

Tonasket project pays respect to all veterans

By K.C. Mehaffey

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World photo/K.C. Mehaffey

The U.S. Armed Forces Legacy Project in Tonasket honors all veterans, including those living and those who have died, those who served long ago, and those who are still serving. Tonasket's American Legion held a Veterans Day ceremony at the site Thursday. Just before the ceremony, children in local Boy Scouts and Campfire Girls were given flags to hold while leading the Pledge of Allegiance.

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World photo/K.C. Mehaffey

Despite the cold, people lingered after Thursday's Veterans Day ceremony to talk and look at the walls of the U.S. Armed Forces Legacy Project in Tonasket.



World photo/K.C. Mehaffey

TONASKET — An empty lot on the southern edge of Tonasket has been transformed into a place of honor and pride for U.S. veterans, living and dead, retired and currently serving.

It will soon become a place where veterans can also get help and advice or make use of a military library.

At noon on Veterans Day, more than 100 people gathered to honor veterans and to admire the progress at the U.S. Armed Forces Legacy Project.

An honor guard stood in front of two walls filled with names of servicemen and women who have served or are serving in the armed forces.

"When we decided to do this, we didn't really want to make it a memorial. We thought it should be for all vets," said George Frank, a Tonasket veteran who first envisioned the project.

Four of the eight walls that flank the property are nearly filled with names of 460 veterans, whose families have purchased plaques, which help support construction of the project. It's also not limited to veterans from the Tonasket area, or Okanogan County. "This Legacy Project is nationwide. People are putting names on plaques of veterans from all over the country," Frank said. The veterans on the wall date back to the Civil War and include soldiers now serving in Iraq and Afghanistan.

On Thursday, a short ceremony included the Pledge of Allegiance led by Tonasket Boy Scouts, a prayer and taps. A short description of the Legacy Project followed.

"Five years ago, this project only existed in the minds of a few people," Bob Thompson told the crowd. He and his wife built a sign at the project's entrance, and credited the community for donating money and volunteering time to make the project a reality.

"Isn't it amazing what a few good men can do when they have a vision?" asked Mel Shirtlenleib, a manager at Wilbur-Ellis Co. He presented the project with a \$5,000 donation.

Project leaders say these funds are the first to go toward building a 900-square-foot service center, where veterans will be able to get qualified help on Veterans Administration issues, such as advice on benefits or housing loans. The \$100,000 building will also house a military library, open to all.

"We're hoping that by Nov. 11 next year we'll be able to dedicate the building," said Roger Castelda, a Vietnam veteran and one of the originators of the Legacy Project.

Castelda said he and Frank went to the Tonasket Town Council to ask about using the half-acre lot, and when they left, they had a 99-year lease for \$1, Castelda said.

Then, other veterans got involved and "the project kept growing and growing," he said.

In addition to the eight walls, a 50-foot flagpole sits in the center of the property, surrounded by five basalt columns, each with a flag and brass emblem for each of the five branches of service.

People gathered before Thursday's Veterans Day ceremony to look at four of eight walls, which are nearly filled with names, at the U.S. Armed Legacy Forces Project in Tonasket. Next year, veterans hope to build a service center for veterans at the site.



George Frank

Tonasket American Legion
chaplain

Veterans have raised more than \$100,000 in donations and grants, and by selling plaques for \$100 each. And more than \$30,000 in donated labor and materials have been given so far.

They continue to sell plaques, as well as basalt pillars around the property, honoring veterans while raising money for the project.

Next year, in addition to building the service center and military library, the Tonasket School District will design murals depicting eight war scenes dating back to the Civil War, which will be painted on the back of the walls.

To complete the project, the veterans plan to put in sidewalks, and build a footbridge over Bonaparte Creek so pedestrians can walk to the park from downtown Tonasket without walking along Highway 97.

Frank said when he first envisioned using the lot to honor veterans, he never dreamed it would grow into such a huge project.

"It's just amazed me how much people want to help," he said.

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