

Wreaths Across America honors vets during holiday season

The holidays can be a difficult time for those who have lost loved ones. For families of veterans that have been laid to rest, the simple act of laying a wreath at the graveside brings some comforts to greiving hearts.

Each December, Wreaths Across America holds wreath-laying ceremonies in cemeteries across the country to honor veterans. It gives the cemeteries a festive touch, and shows that those who have walked on are not forgotten during the holiday season. This year the event was held on Dec. 17, and five local cemeteries participated.

District 4 City Councilor Fran Palochak, a U.S. Navy Veteran herself, is one of the coordinators for the Sunset Memorial Park cemetery. Her involvement with Wreaths Across America started about four years ago, when she was asked to help with the ceremony at the New Mexico State Veterans Cemetery.

“I didn’t know anything about [Wreaths Across America at the time], but it was a beautiful ceremony where they had me as a Navy vet place the commemorative wreath on an easel to honor the Navy veterans who are deceased,” Palochak said.

Palochak said another purpose of the nationwide event is to educate children.

“The purpose behind Wreaths Across America is to remember our fallen U.S. veterans, to honor those who have served, and to teach the children who help us put the wreaths out the value of freedom and what these people gave up by joining the service, and why they’re allowed to live free today,” Palochak explained.

Dave Brown also serves as one of the coordinators for the New Mexico State Veterans Cemetery. He echoed Palochak’s sentiments when asked about this annual tradition.

“It’s a matter of appreciation. This nation wouldn’t be what it is without the veterans’ sacrifice – those servicemen and women who realize that obligation that we have to give back, who signed up for any branch of service,” Brown said. “It’s just an opportunity for anyone who is appreciative of the freedoms we enjoy nowadays to be able to give back or recognize the contributions made by those who put their lives on the line or those who were at least willing to, and most importantly the people who have lost their lives.”

Palochak said that during the first year she was involved, the organization only laid out 35 wreaths at the New Mexico State Veterans Cemetery. This year, they had 884 to put on veterans’ graves across the five cemeteries.

“We got more than we did in the past, but it’s our goal to have every fallen vet have a wreath during Christmas,” Palochak said.

A wreath costs $15, which is typically a cost that the veterans’ families pay. But wreaths can also be donated. Palochak said that the cemeteries have a deal in which if someone buys two wreaths for $30, they donate a third one.

“That helps us give [a wreath] to someone who has no family left,” Palochak explained.

Before the volunteers went out to the cemeteries this year, an opening ceremony was held. Mayor Louie Bonaguidi spoke, and Palochak sang the National Anthem.

Palochak said she appreciates the silent respect that the deceased veterans receive.

“I think what I like about [the event] is that when we go out to the cemeteries and we have volunteers there, how reverent they are when they put down those wreaths. They put them down, they say the person’s name, and they thank them for their service,” Palochak said.

Palochak also gave a special shout out to the medical corps that were present.

“I noticed that while the civilians wouldn’t salute, those that were in the medical corps, when they would place the wreaths down, they would sit back and salute. I thought that was beautiful, that really touched me, watching people do that,” Palochak said.

Next year’s Wreaths Across America event will take place Dec. 16.

By Molly Ann Howell
Sun Correspondent