

DeGlopper Memorial: Signs point the way to 'recognize & commemorate those who have given the ultimate sacrifice for our country'

BY MICHAEL J. BILLONI

As a long-time member of Grand Island's East Park Garden Club, Fay McDonald was excited when the club purchased a Blue Star Memorial Highway Marker for the New York State Thruway Authority 1-190 in 1968. The Blue Star Memorial Program began as a living memorial to veterans of World War II in 1944. A year later, in 1945, the National Council of State Garden Clubs adopted the program.

"The Blue Star Memorial Highway Marker was important for us as a group back then, but we were also 50 years younger," explained McDonald, who said the club was a member of the national council. "Today, the Blue Star Memorial Highway Marker is extremely important to me, personally, because I believe it is very important for all of us to do everything we can to recognize and commemorate those who have given the ultimate sacrifice for our country."

When the original marker arrived, the New York State Thruway Authority worked closely with the East Park Garden Club to find a location along the thruway

on Grand Island. It was finally placed adjacent to the lone tollbooth at the North Grand Island Bridge. Members of the local garden club were responsible for planning, planting, replanning and replanting around the marker. Exhaust fumes from thruway traffic prevented shrubs, perennials and annuals from growing successfully at the site.

In July of 1970, a chemical truck leaking fumes as it went through the toll sent eight people to the hospital. That included thruway employees working in the booth and drivers and passengers of cars close to the tanker.

"We feel this incident definitely affected the survival of our new plantings. Red canna bulbs and red petunias replaced the salvia," it is written in the East Park Garden Club's historical book.

A few years later when a second toll was built at the North Bridge, the Thruway Authority moved the marker to the South Bridge, but Garden Club members were concerned because the tolls there were geographically off the island. The only spot they could place the marker was near the toll building on the east side of the highway. The marker remains there today.

In May of 2015, McDonald, who was steadfast with other members that the sign must be located on Grand Island, contacted Mary Cooke, a former town supervisor and council member, and current historian for the DeGlopper Memorial Expansion Committee. Looking for a proper location, they talked about the VFW Post, the Moose Lodge, Veteran's Park or the overlook on East River Road or Buckhorn State Park.

"Then all of a sudden it all fell into



A tribute to those who served on behalf of this nation is a part of the DeGlopper Memorial on Grand Island.

place," McDonald said. "Mary invited me to a meeting at the Moose Lodge and they were discussing the DeGlopper Memorial and, when I asked where we should move the marker, Dan Drexelius said it must go into the park. That started me calling all over until I found an angel in Matt Latko of the New York State Thruway Authority. I cannot say enough good things about what he and Dan did for us, and now the marker is at home in DeGlopper Memorial and our entire Garden Club is very pleased where it is now located."

Latko, a former engineer with the Thruway Authority, is the Buffalo Division director. After hearing McDonald's story, he decided to keep the sign at the South Bridge and he sent another sign to Albany to have it refurbished. With the sign looking like new, he called Drexelius and had it transported to Double D's warehouse. A volunteer team placed it on a pole and inserted it in the park, near the Killed in Action monument and individual stations at the south end of the property at Baseline Road and Grand Island Boulevard.

"If it wasn't for Fay McDonald, the sign would not be in the park," said

Drexelius, the site's project manager. "Fay brought it to our attention and then pestered New York state until she found an angel in Matt Latko, and the rest is history."

"That marker is all-inclusive of everyone who has given their lives in battle while fighting to keep us all safe back home," explained McDonald, whose husband, Richard, is a veteran of the U.S. Army who worked on Nike missiles during the 1960s.

"It is wonderful what they are doing with this DeGlopper Memorial to recognize veterans on Grand Island," Richard said. "For the past 15 years, the significance of being a veteran has become more public in America and that is great to see."

Dick Keane of the New York State Thruway Authority said, "I've known and worked with Matt for just over 10 years and it has been a pleasure getting to know him personally and professionally."

"Getting involved and assisting with relocating the Blue Star Memorial Highway Award Marker was something that came naturally to Matt. He has always been hands-on when it came to helping the various community groups that border the thruway, in whatever way possible."

"So, when we got the call to assist with relocating the marker. Matt recommended we clean up the weather-worn marker, as well, and make it more presentable for its new home, which we did."

"Matt recognized what an honor it was for the thruway to proudly display the Blue Star Memorial Highway Award along our roadway over the years, and a little polish and a spit shine only seemed fitting."

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Charles N. DeGlopper Memorial Statue and Killed in Action Plaques Unveiling Saturday, June 5, 2021, 9:45 a.m.

Grand Island Boulevard at the corner of Baseline Road



GEORGE H. KINNEY

February 11, 1927 - April 25, 1951



Master Sergeant (M-Sgt) Kinney was born in North Tonawanda and spent some of his boyhood living with an aunt on Grand Island. He enlisted in the Army in 1945 and served thirty months in Germany before being discharged in February 1950. He re-enlisted that May and was stationed in NY City with a military police detachment until October 1950 when he volunteered for service in Korea.

M-Sgt. Kinney was a member of the 7th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Infantry Division and killed in action near Tongmang-ni, South Korea. He was awarded the Purple Heart and received several other honors.

A stone monument built entirely by Koreans in Munsan-ni, South Korea was dedicated to M-Sgt. Kinney's memory in 1959. Present for the dedication was M-Sgt. Kinney's brother, Maj. William H. Kinney, who had served 13 months in that area.

M-Sgt. Kinney is buried at White Chapel Memorial Park, Amherst, New York.

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