

Honoring Island heroes

continued from Page 2

was originally scheduled for last June but postponed because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Renowned Youngstown sculptor Susan Geissler was commissioned to create the life-sized likeness of DeGlopper. She has spent a considerable amount of time working on each detail of the soldier, including features to his face to "make him look determined," she said.

Creating the KIA Stories

Once work was assigned for the north end of the property where the statue is being placed, the attention was focused on the KIA monument and how to tell the stories of each of the 17 Grand Island residents killed in action. It was found the plaque on the monument needed to be updated and Drexelius used his connections to have that completed so the list includes veterans from World War I, World War II, the Korean War, Vietnam War and Operation Iraqi Freedom. They also decided to have a panel dedicated to an unknown soldier.

"As a group, we decided the Memorial site should also be a memorial for the KIAs as well as all Grand Island veterans," Anderson said.

"Our objective was easy - we wanted to showcase each soldier, including their picture and their story," Wegrzyn explained. "The challenge was how we would accomplish that task."

The result can be seen at the site with the remaining KIA stations in place well before the unveiling. Accomplishing this task has proved to be a true team effort by many volunteers, with Wegrzyn leading the team. The first order of business was telling the story and locating photos of each soldier on the list. Cooke, Wegrzyn and others were charged with that task and they found it easy to locate stories about the more current soldiers and DeGlopper. Eight from the early wars proved to be a greater challenge, and Cooke is still seeking contact information for family members of several soldiers so they could be contacted about the unveiling.

"This has been a long but wonderful experience," explained Cooke, the recording secretary for the Historical Society and a recently appointed member of the town's Historical Preservation Advisory Board. "The research has been extensive, and I feel as if I know each of these men personally. They were very heroic, and it was very tragic on how their lives ended; but what a gift this is for all of us to now learn about each of them."

Once photos were found and the short stories written, Wegrzyn took them to ASI Signage on Grand Island where Bethany Bernatovicz, Shawna Joslyn and their team refurbished each photo and printed them on an acrylic sheet to assure the photos would last forever. They also designed a way to adhere the pictures onto the bottom panel of the

glass. Steve Gorcheck of Frontier Glass on Niagara Falls Boulevard in Amherst provided all of the 1-foot by 2-foot black and clear glass for each panel.

GIHS Students Help the Project

Once ASI attached the photos to the glass, the next challenge was how the stories would be etched onto the plaque. Wegrzyn contacted Carl Koppmann, his former technology teacher at Grand Island High School, and presented his dilemma. Koppmann, the school's Engineering Technology educator, had the solution. Working with students Ruby Benz, Justin Chadima and others during the 2017-19 school years, they took a clear sheet of glass from Frontier, etched the entire description backwards, flipped the glass and adhered it to what you see today. The school's English Department proofread all the descriptions before they were etched onto the plaque.

"There was an immense amount of time and effort put into developing a strategy in laser etching onto glass. Working with glass is much different from wood and acrylic, and the tempered glass posed some difficulty," Wegrzyn explained. "Carl and his students prevailed and found a way to complete the task."

Brian Graham, Ed. D, superintendent of Grand Island Central Schools and a member of the Rotary Club of Grand Island, is extremely proud of the students involved and the role Koppmann and the high school played in this important project. "The Grand Island Central Schools have had a long history of preparing students for a life of civic engagement. Our school system endeavors to ensure that our students take pride in the successes we have had as a country promoting and protecting freedom and democracy here and across the world. We are extremely proud of Keith Wegrzyn, Mr. Koppmann and all of the Technology students who took the time to use their skills to inspire a sincere respect for the sacrifices made by previous generations," he said.

A Community Endeavor

Frontier Glass then took the two pieces of glass and combined them to create the windowpane affect seen today. Larry Bota and his wife, Deb, of Bota Welding and Fabrication, fabricated and installed all of the stainless steel stands that hold the glass panels. Larry also designed a way to open and close the metal structure, allowing the committee to maintain the glass panel or make any repairs. A team of volunteers dug holes and poured concrete for the stations, and which Bota meticulously angled each one so visitors would not experience too much sun glare or reflections.

"For me, it has been a privilege to work with this amazing committee to build something like this. It has been a humbling experience learning about these heroes from our town," Wegrzyn said.

"This has been a community endeavor," Roesch said. "There are so many groups and

individuals who have participated in this project, that it has truly been a collaborative effort."

Drexelius, who was also closely involved with the building of the Miracle League Field on Grand Island, is experiencing the same feelings with this project that he felt when the field for those with disabilities was built in 2010. "Similar to when we were the first community in Western New York to build such a field, everyone we asked for help said yes," he explained. "That has been happening since we started this project. It has been so humbling being around our great veterans and learning so much about those who gave their lives fighting for what we have today."

"This is truly a project all of Grand Island can be proud of forever. So many Island residents played a part, from coming out and volunteering to roll the sod, to sweeping the sidewalks to writing a check for a few dollars, they all have helped, and we are so appreciative of them," he added.

How to Donate to the Memorial

The project has a budget of \$750,000 and according to Taylor they still to raise \$170,000. "The major items have been secured financially, so we are ready to unveil the statue, but the remaining dollars will allow us to complete our overall vision of the DeGlopper Memorial and we are confident donations will continue to come," explained Taylor, a veteran who owns Certified AutoBrokers on Grand Island Boulevard and whose uncle, Philip C. Taylor, was killed in action during the Vietnam War.

Details on donating to the DeGlopper Memorial can be found at the bottom of the KIA display on Page 2 in today's Island Dispatch. The Island Dispatch will publish the photo of the 17 KIAs and the Unknown Soldier each Friday through June 4, the day before the DeGlopper statue is unveiled.

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DeGlopper Committee seeks information on Veterans Killed in Action

The DeGlopper Memorial Expansion Committee is seeking help from the community to obtain contact information leading to family or friends of the following Grand Island Veterans Killed in Action since World War I:

- Edward P. Pierce, WWI
- Francis K. Goodchild, WWII
- Howard W. Salton, WWII
- Charles A. Smith, WWII
- George E. Smith, WWII
- Albert J. Keppler, Korea

- George H. Kinney, Korea
- Joseph A. L'Huillier, Vietnam

The committee would like to have representatives of each hero present at the formal dedication ceremony at the site on June 5, 2021.

Please contact Mary Cooke with any information. Call or text 716-255-5838, e-mail maryscooke@roadrunner.com, or snail mail 775 North Colony Road, Grand Island, NY 14072

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