



Pictured above is a structure that displays the names of Nebraska Vietnam veterans in order to “honor [their] courage, sacrifice and devotion to duty and country.” Pictured below is the memorial at a far distance. (photo: Trey Lovings)

Monument invites students to get in touch with history

BY ILIANA VEGA

Heading south from the school on 108th Street, just past Foundation Field and SumTur Amphitheater, observant drivers and passersby can see a glimpse of helicopter blades sticking out above the curve of the horizon. Many surely have seen the helicopter, or parts of it, as it sits a few feet in the air, among tall flags and illuminating lights. What some might not recognize is that this helicopter is a UH-1 Huey, and is part of a depiction of a rescue mission led by Nebraska service members during the Vietnam War.

The often overlooked Nebraska Vietnam Veterans Memorial, located at 11695 S. 108th St. in Papillion, celebrated its opening ceremony two summers ago, on June 6, 2024 –the culmination of more than five years of planning and construction. A little over 1,500 people, a combination of veterans and families of veterans, gathered among the monument’s obelisks and statues to honor the life-changing services of Nebraskans numbering in the thousands.

Executive Director of the

Nebraska Vietnam Veterans Memorial Foundation, Ron Elwell, recalled it clearly. “There were families and Vietnam veterans touching the wall, recognizing names of cousins, brothers, fathers,” he said. “There [were] people from all across the country that came out for it. It was huge and very impactful.”

The opening day was a show of love, appreciation, and support for the Vietnam veterans. Since then, others have made the drive to reflect on the event, and to utilize the many QR codes and audio options scattered throughout the memorial park to educate

themselves about the war and the personal experiences of Nebraskans who served in it.

This inspired longtime Papillion Middle School English teacher Elizabeth Richards to encourage her 7th-grade students, who were learning about the war while reading the novel “Stand Tall,” to do the same. She incentivized the opportunity with extra credit for those who took photos of themselves visiting the memorial.

“Stand Tall” is a novel by Joan

Bauer, which follows a tall middle school boy nicknamed Tree whose grandfather has undergone an amputation due to a Vietnam War-related injury just as the boy is learning to deal with his parent’s divorce. The book makes numerous references to the war, and Richards has always made a point to give students historical background during the unit. She saw the new memorial as a powerful way to get that message across.

“I could probably talk to them all day long about Vietnam, but until you see the helicopter, until you see some of the statues, and until you see the stories of the people, it doesn’t make as much impact,” Richards said.

Papillion La Vista Community Schools Superintendent Dr. Andrew Rikli recognized the value of having the memorial built in close proximity to some of the district’s schools.

“I think... [it] is just general awareness. There are wars in U.S. history that, by their very nature, tend to get more attention than others,” Rikli said. “I think having a memorial

dedicated to that conflict can bring some awareness to our students that they might not otherwise have. And... any time we can... commemorate something that our veterans had a hand in, that’s really, really important for our students, because so many of them are military dependents.”

A visit of any kind accomplishes the goal of the memorial, which is to keep alive the memories of Nebraskans who served. It also acts as an educational journey for future and current students. Community support was important in the early stages of building the memorial, when the Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter 279 originally proposed it in 2019. At the start of fundraising through a capital campaign, the VVA had visions of a \$300,000 project and ambitious ideas for its construction.

Just as the memorial was taking its first steps into getting donations, the COVID-19 pandemic hit. The fundraising process was slower than anticipated, but as the initial difficulties of the pandemic decreased, more and more people got involved.

“[The VVA] slowly started getting more people on board, in an advisory committee role. Some famous names like Bob Kerrey, Chuck Hagel...,” Elwell said, “...a few larger donors – DJ’s Dugout was a big part, Darwin Hanson... a lot of local people, some national people, and... a grant from the American Rescue Plan.”

In the end, the total needed for the memorial rose to \$7.2 million, and that money came from the horsepower of those who could offer their support.

One participant in that process was superintendent Rikli. As a contributor in a committee board role, Rikli explained that he participated in communicating the importance of the construction. Nebraska was one of the few states at the time that didn’t have a dedicated Vietnam veterans memorial. Rikli took the time to help the cause not only for that reason, but also because of the strong military presence in Nebraska.

“I think the component of military service really resonated with me...,” Rikli said. “Right in our back yard, we have [the] 55th Air Wing and STRATCOM. ... So supporting something that supports our nation’s military was very important to me.”

The final hurdle was figuring out where to build the memorial. Finding



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land was a struggle, until the group approached Papillion Mayor David Black. The mayor, a passionate supporter of veterans from all eras, according to Elwell, advocated to provide the land on a lease.

“It was 2+ acres that the city, with the City Council’s approval, donated... for a dollar a year for 50 years,” Elwell explained.

That agreement cemented the memorial’s place in the community.

“By this memorial, for future generations, those fallen have never been left behind – they are recognized on a regular basis,” Elwell said, emphasizing the importance of teaching new generations the past, not only to discuss the significance of events, but also to avoid making the same mistakes in the future.

Elwell pointed out how, when veterans of other wars returned home,

Longtime Papillion Middle School English teacher Elizabeth Richards asked her students to take a photo of themselves at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial for extra credit as part of her unit over the novel “Stand Tall” by Joan Bauer. (courtesy photo: Elizabeth Richards)

One of eleven obelisks, this one bearing the names of significant events within the specified year 1970. (photo: Trey Lovings)



they were welcomed and thanked for their services; few Vietnam veterans, however, had that experience. By building the memorial, and visiting it regularly, the community has a way to finally recognize those veterans. “When you go to the memorial, or your peers go to the memorial, those names will be read, and maybe said out loud, and they’re never forgotten,” Elwell said.