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Wake County hospice memorial honors vets and their stories

By Thomasi McDonald

tmcDonald@newsobserver.com May 24, 2014

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RALEIGH — Each of the 61 bricks that are a part of the new military veterans garden in West Raleigh tells a poignant, albeit brief, story.

There, on one brick, are the names of the Tomasello brothers – Humbert, Vick, Vince and Angelo – who all served in World War II.

“Only two came home,” said Sandy Schiller, who works and volunteers at the Wake County Hospice’s Transitions LifeCare on Hospice Circle.

Another brick honors Robert M. Hall, an Army colonel who served during World War II, the Korean War and Vietnam.

There’s one 4-inch-by-8-inch brick for Donald Blanchard, a technical sergeant with the Marines who saw combat in Iwo Jima during World War II.

The 61 bricks are part of the Veterans Garden that was officially opened during a dedication early Saturday afternoon at the hospice near Trinity and Edwards Mill Roads.

The bricks make up a six-sided monument, encircled by a 2-foot wall of layered brick and glazed concrete. The monument’s sides honor the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, Coast Guard and Merchant Marines. The engraved bricks are arranged according to branch of service. A flagpole in the middle of the monument will be illuminated at night.

“We are here to dedicate our Veterans Garden to those brave men and women who have served our country in the armed forces,” said John Thoma, chief executive officer of Transitions LifeCare, which was founded as the Hospice of Wake County in 1979. “We are here to recognize the sacrifices their families made as these veterans were away protecting our freedom.”

Beyond the names and small stories engraved on the red bricks, the Memorial Day weekend ceremony also lauded a new program that gives dying service members a final voice to open up and talk – most for the very first time – about their lives in the military, and in combat, behind enemy lines.

This came about two years ago, when TLC developed We Honor Our Veterans, a national program that trains military veterans to visit hospice patients who are also veterans. Thoma pointed out that one in four dying Americans is a military veteran.

In addition to the visits, the 30 volunteers have been trained through the TLC program to pay tribute to their dying comrades by conducting recognition ceremonies. The vets receive a certificate of appreciation, a small American flag and a flag lapel pin.

The veterans’ thoughts about their military experiences are given final voice when volunteers listen to the stories of the dying patients.

“Sadly, many of our patients have never shared these stories of their military service with their families,” Thoma said.

Darcy Dye, a TLC spokeswoman, agreed.

Dye said that during the recognition ceremonies, which have so far honored 500 veterans, the families are often hearing the stories for the first time.

“They are like, ‘Wow,’ ” she said.

One of the volunteers, Kemp Neill, a retired Army colonel who served in Vietnam, said the volunteers spend time with the dying veterans, who eventually open up and talk about their military experiences.

Being a fellow veteran helps immensely, Neill added.

“We are able to go in and establish a rapport because we have been through the same thing,” he said. “You have experienced the same thing and they know that.”

James Butler, a TLC volunteer services team leader, noted that the We Honor Our Veterans program has helped individuals, families and communities embrace meaning at the end of life.

“Some of our hospice patients have walked through the sands of Iwo Jima, parachuted behind enemy lines in France on D-Day, fought fires on the burning ships in Pearl Harbor, waded through the rice paddies in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam,” Butler said. “One had cooked for hungry troops in the mountains of Korea; another had been a pall bearer at President Roosevelt’s funeral.”

TLC officials say 1,800 American military veteran die each day. The average age at death is 85.

“The numbers don’t tell the whole story,” Dye said. “The 1,800 – that’s not hospice patients, that’s all veterans. They could be from any war.”

Neill, the retired Army colonel, said it is important to remember the real meaning of Memorial Day, beyond the picnics, time spent with family or even catching sales at the malls.

“That’s all good,” he said. “But the real meaning is to honor those who have given their lives and served their country.”

McDonald: 919-829-4533

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