

Los Gatos memorial sparks healing and remembrance

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By Grace Hase | PUBLISHED: July 14, 2019 at 7:24 am | UPDATED: July 14, 2019 at 7:30 am

July 14,
2019

Tucked back in a grove of redwoods at the foot of the Civic Center, Los Gatos' new Flame of Liberty Memorial has become a symbol of healing.

The memorial, which was unveiled last month, honors active service members, veterans, first responders and two 9/11 heroes who were aboard United Flight 93. Designed by Memphis-based artist Frank Kocian Morris, the memorial features a flame and a battlefield cross—a symbol for a fallen soldier.

"The inspiration was really the torch from the Statue of Liberty," Morris said. "It evolved into being an eternal flame. The eternal flame is a universally recognized symbol for remembrance."

Retired Maj. Gen. Kent Hillhouse, board president of the Veterans Memorial and Support Foundation of Los Gatos, said the memorial has a calming effect akin to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C.

"People want to honor those who have served and their families," said Hillhouse, who is a veteran of the Vietnam War. "It has a healing effect."

When the foundation launched in 2012, board director Ellen Manzo said that its vision was to find a way to help service members and their families. But the Flame of Liberty's first sparks took off when founders realized that a memorial could be a unique way of doing that through education.

"We have to do everything in perpetuity," Manzo said. "We also had the voice in our ear that we really need to recognize (Vietnam) veterans who served. If we built a memorial, a memorial educates 24/7 and it delivers respect."

The dedication would end up including first responders as well as Todd Beamer and Mark Bingham, two Los Gatos High School graduates who were aboard United Flight 93 when it crashed into a field in Pennsylvania on 9/11. Beamer and Bingham were both part of the group that tried to overpower the hijackers.

"I don't know if many people put together the dots of what would have happened if (United Flight 93) succeeded in the mission targeted by the terrorists," Manzo said. "Where have we recognized these two individuals? And what better way to recognize them than at this memorial site?"

Los Gatos Mayor Steven Leonardis said that in the month since the unveiling, the memorial “appears to be very well received by the community.”

“Every time I pass by the memorial, I see two to three groups of people viewing it,” he said.

Although the memorial has been completed, the work of the Veterans Memorial and Support Foundation isn’t done; they still have money left to raise to pay off debts and fully fund the project. Manzo said that their campaign aims to raise \$2.6 million; \$200,000 of that is earmarked for maintenance and another \$200,000 is earmarked for the launch of programming.

“Our goal in a much broader way is to support service members and their families” through programs, Manzo said. “Over the course of time the needs of the military have changed. The kinds of programs we may institute or support will likely be different a decade down the road.”

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