



Memorial Gardens for the Next Generation

By Brenda Bredahl

Communities create legacy spaces for veterans, active duty service members and citizens

Veterans' memorials have long served as outdoor tributes to men and women who have been lost, injured or captured during war and conflict. Names are etched in stone for perpetuity, a lasting reminder of their brave service. In recent years, communities have taken this honored tradition further by creating outdoor spaces that also honor active and retired military and, in some cases, emergency services personnel.

Landscaped and hardscaped memorial gardens - typically situated on municipal properties, donated land, public parks or in city cemeteries - bring communities together. The collaborative process of constructing a memorial space can be rewarding, bringing together veterans' groups, citizens, school and youth groups, civic leaders, local businesses and others far and wide. Materials and services may be discounted or donated by local businesses, and volunteers often provide sweat equity.

A Tale of Two Cities

Two neighboring St. Paul suburbs are among the municipalities that have embraced building veterans' memorials. The City of Oakdale Veterans' Memorial was completed in 2012. Next door in North St. Paul, an entire city park will be developed as a veterans' park and memorial, commencing this year.

"The Oakdale Veterans' Memorial was a rewarding collaboration for everyone involved and a beautiful and fitting tribute to veterans and their families," says Bill Rasmussen, a member of VFW Post 1350 who helped establish the Oakdale Veterans' Memorial, a nonprofit 501(c)3 organization. "It's a place of honor, reflection and pride. Oakdale citizens now have a place for Memorial Day and Veterans' Day observances and other events." Rasmussen said the process from start to finish took about three years. "At the start, we worked with a certified public accountant to handle the legal process and our fundraising, and we worked with the city council to gain public input and approval," he said.

"We were offered a spot on city hall property, and local resident Joe Samuel, who was with MSA Professional Services at the time, provided the initial design at a substantial discount."

Through the 501(c)3 organization, members of American Legion Post 39 and VFW Post 1350, citizens and city officials and employees completed the planning, raised funds and oversaw construction. The group made about \$8,000 from the raffle of a motorcycle provided to the group at wholesale from St. Paul Harley-Davidson. About \$19,000 was collected from the pre-sale of engraved pavers, and the remainder of the \$44,000 project was funded by a low-interest loan from the city. The loan payment and maintenance is provided by the ongoing sale of engraved pavers, an annual fish fry fundraiser and a presence at community events like a weekly farmers' market and summer festivals.

"We were lucky in that everything fell together for us," Rasmussen said. "While our initial estimate was about \$90,000, we talked with the contractor and engineers at the retaining wall supplier, who helped come up with an alternative wall design that brought the cost down to \$44,000."

The 800 square-foot hardscape project wasn't without its challenges. "A fiber optic line to city hall needed to be replaced, so we had to wait on the utility company for that," said Rasmussen. "We also were able to save an eight-inch diameter oak tree and move it to the city band shell. This was the first time the city transplanted such a large tree. Employees from the City of

Woodbury came to watch because they wanted to move some large trees, too."

Completed and dedicated in October 2012, the Oakdale Veterans' Memorial includes a retaining wall with pilasters framing black granite commemorative plaques with an image of a bald eagle, a poem, dedication text and insignia from the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, Coast Guard and Merchant Marines. Engraved paving stones with the names of active, retired or deceased veterans are set in various areas through the landscaped spaces, and the landscaped spaces are enhanced by natural stone benches, water features and basalt pillars.

Next-Door Neighbors

Residents in neighboring North St. Paul also had been thinking about a veterans' park and memorial for years. In 2011, members of the same VFW and Legion, city officials and the North High School Junior ROTC program joined together to transform the former Cannon Park at the north corner of Margaret Street and Highway 36 into the North St. Paul Veterans Park and Memorial Wall.

"The idea was started in the 1980s, but (was) put on a back burner," says Joe Zakrzewski, a member of American Legion Post 39 who serves as committee secretary for the North St. Paul Veterans' Park Foundation, organized through Post 39. Last year members of the foundation attended four city council meetings to get the process started, which resulted in a statement of public support via a resolution.

The project picked up steam, Zakrzewski says, when articles in the local newspaper highlighted the committee's progress and when the foundation regularly set up a table at the city's Friday night car shows last summer. As in Oakdale, the purchase of engraved pavers was open to veterans from any locale, and plans were made for a memorial wall to include the names of veterans from all conflicts and eras with the zip code 55109 listed as Killed in Action, Missing in Action and Prisoners of War.

The foundation is currently completing the permitting process, and a Lake Elmo architecture firm, DSGW, is providing the design pro bono. "The NSP Veterans Park Committee was integral in designing and conceptualizing the project throughout the process. It was a highlight to collaborate with the committee," said Steve Knutson, a designer with DSGW, who is involved with the project. "DSGW has provided design and visualization assistance for both planning and fund-raising, also technical specifications and construction documents for construction."

Knutson's design is intended to reflect patriotism, says Dan Fisher, co-chair of the NSP Veteran's Park Foundation. "Veterans Park is visually unique in that it coordinates the patriotic colors and symbols of the American flag to tell the story in pavers of American Veterans of all eras in the North Saint Paul community, the state of Minnesota, and the United States," he says.

Fortunately, fundraising has exceeded expectations. "In 16 months, we had raised \$94,000, and people from New York to Texas purchased pavers, including one to remember a veteran from the Civil War," said Zakrzewski. "In March, committee members co-chairs Fisher and Tom Trost along with the mayor and a city council member presented the project to the Minnesota Legislature, focusing on the regional and statewide importance of the veterans' park and memorial."

That resulted in state bonding and Legacy funding totaling almost \$110,000. With ongoing fundraising and sale of engraved pavers, Zakrzewski expects that all phases of construction will be adequately funded. The foundation is also offering pavers to groups like the Order of the Purple Heart and businesses who wish to purchase larger pavers as an honorarium to vets. "We hope to have a formal groundbreaking this fall and have our first Memorial Day service in 2015," Zakrzewski says.

Rasmussen says a community memorial project is simply dedicated people working together. "We are very grateful to all of the volunteers and businesses who helped with the project or donated materials and time and made this project a reality," he says. •

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Bill Rasmussen (left), Randy Bastyr (right), retired City of Oakdale parks superintendent, and Jerry Koecher (center), Linwood Contracting, worked together with their community to make the Oakdale Veterans' Memorial a reality. The memorial created with retaining walls holding three commemorative plaques and engraved concrete paving stones with the names of veterans.

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