



Submitted

Veterans from Kansas gather May 3 at the World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C. Lyndon took back-to-back trips to the memorial on April 30 and May 3.

Honor Flights

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"Their morning routine is to be at the coffee shop at 7 a.m. in the morning," Patterson said. "I left it there for them, because they had slept in."

Additional Flights

With just six weeks of planning and fundraising, Lyndon High School had pulled off the first Honor Flight in Kansas. The trip itself, through both media coverage and the actions of the veterans that had gone, led to more fundraising for the Lyndon program.

"A lot of them told their families 'I don't want anything for Christmas,'" Payne said. "They told them to send whatever money they would have spent on presents to send other veterans to the memorial."

They began contacting a second group of veterans, including locals and those on Honor Flights' waiting list.

"They're ready to go when I call them," Payne said. "They've been waiting for this trip their whole lives."

Lyndon took more flights on April 30 and May 3, sending 72 more veterans to the memorial. The Lyndon staff, doctors and students divided themselves into two groups for the back-to-back trips.

"We didn't feel like we could do it physically," Payne said.

The second round of flights went just as well as the first, with the only setback being an unseasonably warm day on the April 30 trip.

"The first trip went so smooth that it probably set the bar too high," Payne said. "It makes you nervous for future trips, but so far, they've gone smooth."

The spring trips set the number at 107 veterans that have visited the memorial through Lyndon High School.

As the group flew into Baltimore on the May 3 flight, Spencer encountered a woman who was curious about the group.

"She asked me what the group was," Spencer said. "I

said World War II vets going to see the memorial."

The group waited to unload until everyone else had gotten off the plane, as they always do, to stay together. They arrived to a standing ovation in the terminal.

"The whole place applauded and cheered the vets," Spencer said.

He saw the lady who had approached him on the plane, and she asked Spencer to give a message to the veterans. Spencer encouraged her to do it herself.

"I wouldn't be able to get through it," She said. "These guys saved my family. If it were for all these guys, my family would have been eliminated."

"That was meaningful for the kids," Spencer said. "They realized that these guys, who could hardly walk now, weren't always old guys in wheelchairs. At one point, they were young, vibrant people that helped save the world."

Student Involvement

Honor Flights have been taking veterans around the county to the WWII Memorial May 2005; however, Lyndon's twist on the program set a whole new precedent.

"We were the first group, nationwide, to use students," Payne said.

Lyndon's program has allowed the students who have chosen to participate in the program to go.

"Initially, it was open to all students that wanted to participate," Patterson said. "We had about 25 kids interested initially, half of which were in volleyball or football."

The ones who had conflicts during the initial flight were able to travel on later flights, with some repeating to help fill spots.

The students served as direct contacts for the vets, contacting them prior to the trip to make arrangements, and escorting them the entire day.

"Every student had a vet that needed assistance and one that didn't," Patterson said.

There was also an effort to match interests between

students and veterans.

"If a student was raised on a farm, we tried to find a vet who was," Patterson said. "Some commonality they would share."

To date, the combination of veterans and students has worked well, beyond the needs of assisting the veterans.

"It's just the bonding experience with the vets and the vets with them," Patterson said. "They also get to learn a bit of history. It's a plus all the way around."

Many of the students have developed close relationships with the veterans they traveled with.

Jenny Butler, who graduated from Lyndon High School last May, had anticipated seeing both of the veterans she traveled with again.

"I'd never been to D.C. before, so it was really fun," Butler said. "I had a lot of fun, we took a lot of photos."

One of her veterans, Augie Meyer, Topeka, had made plans to come to Butler's graduation in May.

"He said he'd come," Butler said. "I got a graduation card saying he was coming with his wife."

Meyer, however, died of natural causes just 12 days after taking the flight.

"That was really sad," Butler said. "I'm just glad he got to go on the trip first."

Meyer's wife, and Butler's other veteran from the trip, both made it to her graduation.

"Augie gave me a little journal about his WWII trip that I have now for memory," she said. "I had so many questions, and they answered all of them. It didn't bother them, and they weren't afraid to answer any of them."

Even with the loss, Butler still see the trips as an important and memorable experience. Patterson sees the potential for connections as more reason to increase student involvement in the program.

"I would think Honor Flight would want to look at the way they do it nationally to get more kids involved," Patterson said. "They're energetic and young, and they can help a lot."

Leading by Example

As Lyndon was gearing up for their second and third flights, many other schools and programs around the state had begun planning and taking trips as well, using Lyndon as their blueprint.

"We set the standard high, but we're proud that we did," Patterson said.

On April 17, Southern Coffey County High School, in LeRoy, took its first trip to the monument, using students and borrowing heavily from Lyndon's experience. The school became the second Honor Flight to use students.

Lyndon has also helped programs in Kansas City and Rooks County get started. The group from Kansas City, sponsored by the Jackson County Historical Society, took their first trip June 10. Rooks County presented a different problem, with no

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Rick Latoff/American Battle Monuments Commission

The pillars and fountain at the World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C., at night. The Washington Monument stands behind.