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Vietnam Wall That Heals drew hundreds during 4-day display

BY MARILYN THOMAS
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For four days, a steady stream of people came to Marian Catholic High School to pay their respects at the Wall That Heals, a replica of the Vietnam Memorial Wall in Washington, D.C.

The memorial was on display 24 hours each day July 6 through July 10.

Among those visiting was Rose Pease of South Chicago Heights who found her brother's name etched into one of the granite panels. Michael Gunta was 20 years old when he died April 8, 1969. She still has his picture on her dresser.

"It's so wonderful they're doing this," she said. "They deserve all the respect they are receiving."

The disassembled wall crossed into Illinois at Lansing and got an official escort from first responders, including the Homewood and Flossmoor police departments. Once on the grounds of Marian Catholic, about 60 volunteers helped assemble it, including the football players at Marian and Bloom High Schools.

Bloom Township Supervisor T.J. Somer, who spearheaded the effort, said his team had worked for a year to bring the Wall That Heals to the area. He said he wanted to bring the memorial to the area to draw the attention of young people who may not know the history of the war and the many sacrifices faced by members of the military.

"The memories and meaning behind it are far too critical to all of us as human beings," Somer said. He read a list of names of those killed in action who had lived in the 12 cities and villages in Bloom Township.

Reginald Baker, a retired Cook County Circuit Court judge who served for 20 years at the Markham Courthouse, addressed those gathered at the opening ceremony. Baker is a retired colonel with the United

- Local names on the wall**
- Jeffery C. Lemon, Flossmoor.
 - Park G. Bunker, Homewood.
 - William E. Cofran, Homewood.
 - Thomas H. McGrath, Homewood.
 - William J. Oskilanec, Homewood.
 - James H. Ward, Homewood.
 - Philip O. Zum Mallen Jr., Homewood.

States Marine Corps and served in Vietnam when he was 19. He was in 17 combat missions.

The wall, with its more than 58,000 names, is a tribute "to the American heroes who paid the ultimate price for their citizenship and died for their country," he said.

He recalled visiting the Vietnam Memorial Wall as a tourist. He looked up the name of a buddy he played cards with. "And the names are listed chronologically, and I knew not only his name, but the six that followed," Baker said. They had been fellow Marines who lost their lives in a firefight during Operation Hastings that kept Baker and others pinned down for hours.

During the Vietnam era, the country was divided about the war and newly passed civil rights legislation. Baker said none of that mattered to those who served. Members of the military know true brotherhood.

"You don't have the luxury of being divided," he said. "The blood on the battle field is all one color: red."

He takes great pride in those who wear the uniform today, keeping the oath to defend the country "against all enemies, foreign and domestic." Baker said he also applauds those willing to protect their own honor by telling the truth, recognizing that it may cost them their friends or livelihood.

"There is but one rule of conduct for a man, and that is to do the right thing," Baker told the audience.



Rose Pease of South Chicago Heights finds the name of her brother, Michael Gunta on the 1969 panel of the Wall That Heals while the replica of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial was visiting Marian Catholic High School in early July. The visit was sponsored by Bloom Township.

Marilyn Thomas/H-F Chronicle