

News and stories

Dyer Gold Star family working to honor son killed in Afghanistan

Nov 10, 2017

Meredith Colias | [Chicago Tribune](#)

At Patti and Andrew Nowaczyk's Dyer home, reminders of their son lie throughout the living room — mantels with his military medals, his picture in fatigues, a folded American flag.

David Nowaczyk was a natural athlete at Lake Central where he played football, his parents said. He loved working and being outdoors. His path to the military was set on Sept. 11, 2001, they said.

Driving home from work that night with a war looming, she calculated the odds her 22-year-old son could be drafted into the service.

"I'm thinking, 'David's too old, they won't want him,'" she said.

Arriving home that night, he told her he wanted to enlist.

"I'm like, 'Oh no, you are not,'" she said. "So, we went back and forth on it for a couple of years."

In 2005, Nowaczyk quit a lucrative job driving a cement truck to join the Army.

"He said you can't fight with me anymore, it's done," she said.

For seven years, their son settled into the U.S. Army as an infantryman, enjoying the command structure and responsibility of command as he got promoted.

On his third deployment to Afghanistan, Staff Sgt. Nowaczyk, 33, was killed on April 15, 2012, when his mine-resistant assault protected vehicle ran over a powerful roadside bomb.

Five soldiers total were in the vehicle; others were injured. Nowaczyk left behind a wife, Rachel; daughter, Kiley, then 1; and stepson, Conner.

Almost immediately after his death, a relative suggested they establish a memorial. Five years after his death in Afghanistan, they are continuing to raise money to build a war memorial in Dyer's Central Park.

Their final two-part design was inspired partly by a battlefield cross memorial they saw in Fort Hood, Texas — formed by a soldier's helmet, rifle and boots — a battlefield tribute.

It will include a young girl standing before it with a soldier reaching protectively toward her, they said.

The memorial's second part is a geometric monument that will have an outline of a saluting soldier with inscriptions honoring Gold Star families.

Nowaczyk's parents hope to raise \$250,000. They have raised \$97,000 to date with assistance from the Hershel "Woody" Williams Medal of Honor Foundation.

When completed, it will mark the memory of all service members killed in war, they said. The family helped break ground at Central Park earlier this year, on the fifth anniversary of Nowaczyk's death.

They also help setup a Gold Star memorial Christmas tree at the Indiana Welcome Center in Hammond each year.

According to data from the U.S. Department of Defense compiled by the Washington Post, 154 service members from Indiana have died in Iraq or Afghanistan since 2001 — including more than a dozen from Northwest Indiana.

Hoping to honor them, another war memorial dedicated exclusively to Gulf War, Iraq and Afghanistan service members also could be coming to Northwest Indiana.

Mitch Barloga, president of the Veterans Memorial Parkway Commission, said his organization is interested in adding a section honoring those killed in Middle Eastern conflicts to the 15-mile stretch of U.S. 231 known as Veterans Memorial Parkway.

Since the Parkway is setup to mark wars chronologically from Crown Point to Hebron, such a memorial likely would be placed near the county line outside Hebron, he said.

Next spring, Hebron will break ground on a drainage project near County Line Road and U.S. 231. The plan is to set aside a small tract of land there for the memorial, according to Councilman Donald Ensign.

An access road will be created on the property, he said. With grants, the goal is to later convert it into a walking path and trail. It would be connected near the Stagecoach Inn.

"At a certain point, we will be looking for help to come up with a design," Ensign said. "Any input from any veterans that have served in those wars would be welcome."

Barloga said any plans are in early stages while they work on the establishment of a World War I and World War II memorial in Crown Point. A Vietnam Veterans Memorial was also established at Stoney Run County Park in the early 1970s.

A Korean War Memorial in Leroy that opened in 2003 cost between \$75,000 to \$100,000 — including about \$25,000 raised by his organization, he said.

A similar memorial dedicated to Middle Eastern wars probably would cost about the same and take between three to five years to complete, he said.

"Afghanistan is the longest war that we served in," Barloga said. "We are thinking our involvement in the Middle East is going to be around for quite a while."