

News and stories

Catholic High JROTC raises \$20,500 for Gold Star Monument

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Catholic High School's Marine Corps Junior ROTC program will be able to look with pride upon the Gold Star Families monument when it's erected at the State Capitol this fall, but not just because of the honor it bestows upon families whose loved ones paid the ultimate price for freedom.

The 162 cadets raised \$20,500 toward the \$500,000 cost of the memorial from Oct. 1 to Dec. 15. The contest, proposed by the Marine Corps League, Sidney S. McMath Detachment of Little Rock, challenged Reserve Officers' Training Corps programs in schools throughout the state to raise money for the memorial. The winning school would get a small replica of the larger black granite monument, with a cut out of a saluting soldier to represent those who have died.

Out of the 14 schools that participated, Paul Garrett, co-chairman for the committee to build the Little Rock monument, put it bluntly: "Catholic High not only won, they smoked the competition," he told Arkansas Catholic and later students, faculty and guests during the Feb. 22 unveiling and presentation of the replica.

Sgt. Maj. R.S. Jernigan, MCJROTC instructor, did not want to boast,

but admitted, "The boys at Catholic High School stepped up, rose to the challenge and exceeded all expectations."

"They were excited, they were fired up. If you put it out there and let them know what it's about, they rise to the occasion every time," he said of his cadets.

How to help

Those who want to donate to the Gold Star Family memorial monument at the State Capitol can visit <http://hwwmohf.org/little-rock-ar.html> or mail a check to:

Gold Star Families Memorial
P.O. Box 5670
Jacksonville, AR 72078

The effort to place a monument at the capitol began in early 2017 by the Hershel Woody Williams Medal of Honor Foundation, said Chad Graham, foundation president and chief executive officer. There are currently 32 Gold Star Family monuments in the U.S., paying tribute to loved ones who have had a family member die while serving in the military. On Feb. 23, the city of Beebe erected the first monument in Arkansas. Each monument has its own committee that assists with fundraising and seeing the project through, Graham said. It is the first monument to be erected at a State Capitol, which received legislative approval in February 2017. The bill was presented by former Sen. Eddie Joe Williams of Cabot, who resigned his seat in November to be federal representative to the Southern States Energy Board appointed by the president.

Even though Williams is a U.S. Army veteran, he admitted during the presentation, "You want a job done and done right, call a Marine," he said, to a resounding "Oorah" by the Marine veterans in attendance.

In November, the Arkansas Supreme Court ruled against using

grants from state surplus funds toward the monument, after such grants were promised to provide \$90,000. Garrett said about \$100,000 has been raised so far.

The foundation was spearheaded by veteran Woody Williams, who fought in the Battle of Iwo Jima in 1945. He is the only surviving Marine to receive the Medal of Honor during World War II and the only recipient remaining who served in the Pacific theater. The 94-year-old from West Virginia, who said 73 years earlier on Feb. 22 he was “on the island of Iwo Jima, trying to survive,” spoke to students at the presentation about the importance of recognizing Gold Star families and all those who protect freedoms each day, including law enforcement and first responders.

“So many times they have said to me, ‘Now, now my loved one will not be forgotten,’” Williams said of Gold Star families.

The CHS MCJROTC, one of only two Marine Corps ROTC programs in Arkansas, accepted donations at football games, giving purple and gold bracelets which Jernigan purchased, reached out to alumni, sold pork butts — cooked by Woodman of the World insurance in Conway — and even went door-to-door between fundraisers. Jernigan said the CHS Foundation & Alumni Association donated substantially, as well as Charles and Patty Enderlin, owners of Oak Forest Cleaners in Little Rock, who donated \$2,000.

“I feel they’ve learned it’s not only the service member that sacrifices and pays service to their country; it’s also the family members left behind. They’re giving service by giving up one of their loved ones,” Jernigan said.

U.S. Rep. French Hill, alumnus of Catholic High, also donated \$1,000, which was presented by Missy Rickels, Hill’s chief administrative manager.

After the presentation, Williams talked shop with some of the cadets, who said in his attempt to explain combat, it’s “almost like trying to explain pregnancy, but I’ll try,” he said to a laughing crowd.