Memorial Day Not ‘Just Another Holiday’

Story by Preston Knight, SVEC Writer

From points around its native Virginia to its namesake in the Midwest, the Page County town of Shenandoah leaves an impression with its heartfelt tributes to veterans.

The respectful displays arrive in large part because of Mayor Clinton Lucas, a man many in the town label as “honorable,” Assistant Town Manager Juanita Roudabush said.

“He may not consider himself the honorable mayor,” she said, “but everybody in the town knows, especially everyone who works for the town.”

As Shenandoah prepares for its biggest annual celebration May 27-28, the weekend before Memorial Day, Lucas, its mayor for more than a quarter-century, stands ready to lead the way. Usually, a box of tissues should be close by.

The two days of events feature a car show, lawn party, parade and a special ceremony at the Shenandoah Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 8613, where about 100 people will share in singing patriotic songs and recognizing local veterans, including the oldest living member of the VFW.

Within that special service is a Lucas-inspired tribute to the family of a Virginia soldier who died in combat the previous year and who lived closest to the town. In 2006, the mayor added this touching homage, which includes the presentation of a folded American flag — similar to what’s done at a military funeral — to the family.

From 2006-2013, families of soldiers from Stuarts Draft, Ruckersville, Maurertown, Oakton, Grottoes, Harrisonburg, Broadway, Lexington and Shenandoah have attended, some having never heard of the town before, yet all leaving moved by the generosity of a community of strangers.

“They really didn’t know what we were doing. They thought, ‘They are trying to exploit [the soldiers].’ They were just so honored that we would be keeping up with it to honor their son, father, daughter or whoever it is they lost,” said Lucas, an Army and National Guard veteran who is known to get teary-eyed as he speaks during the service. “It was just something that was well received. I just felt like it was the least we could do.”

In 2014, for the first time, none of the families of Virginia soldiers killed in action could attend, so names were mentioned and photos shown instead. Last year, family members who were invited declined because their loved one’s death occurred barely two months before Memorial Day.

As the U.S. military presence in Iraq and Afghanistan has scaled back, fortunately, the town is finding fewer families of killed soldiers to invite. This year, as of March, there were no Virginia soldiers killed in action over the last year.

Roudabush relies on the Department of Defense’s database of soldiers killed in action, as well as local media reports, to find someone to honor. In 2014-2015, invites went to families of four men and one woman from Moseley, Newport News, Orange, Norfolk and Williamsburg, showing how far-reaching Shenandoah’s commitment is to celebrate the life of a fallen warrior.

“It’s important to note that more Virginia soldiers died from 2006-2015 than those who were specifically honored in Shenandoah,” Lucas said he came up with the idea to honor a fallen veteran as the number of U.S. casualties from the conflict in the Middle East appeared to be rising in the mid-2000s. He draws on some of his own experiences, too.

While he did serve during the Vietnam War, he was not deployed to Vietnam. However, Lucas felt that returning soldiers were condemned for fighting for our freedom.

“People just did not have a good reception when they came home,” he said.

As mayor, Lucas refuses to allow such an attitude to permeate.

“I hope to have a humongous crowd,” he said of the service. “The whole idea is to honor the veterans. People who have never had a military acquaintance, it’s just another holiday to have an extra day off.”

**FULL SCHEDULE**

The Memorial Day celebration is in its 19th consecutive year, though its history goes further back. It’s a fun-filled weekend as much as it can be an emotional one.

On Friday, May 27, there is a vehicle CRUZ IN, flag-retirement ceremony and lawn party, with food from the Shenandoah Volunteer Fire Company.

On Saturday, May 28, following the VFW service at 9:30 a.m., is an antique car,
truck, motorcycle, you-name-it show (Lucas said a restored school bus was there one year); SPCA animals up for adoption; library book sale and reading bus; food vendors; another lawn party with steamed shrimp and chicken; a parade and more.

More than 1,000 people are expected to attend the parade, an event that will feature Grand Marshal Russ Rodriguez, a Shenandoah Elementary School teacher and Marine veteran who served in Iraq. The town has 2,300 residents.

“It just blossomed into a full day of events,” Lucas said.

Town officials stress that it’s a weekend to honor all veterans — past and present — and not just those singled out at the VFW event. But in Shenandoah, a highly visible level of recognition is actually available throughout the year.

Several years ago, the town secured donations to open Shenandoah Veterans Park on Virginia Avenue, across from its post office. The park, which is not a memorial since living veterans can be honored as well, has flagpoles for each military branch, granite memorials with the insignias of each branch, and walls of bricks with the names of veterans.

The cases holding the bricks are at capacity, with the remaining empty spots on reserve. Nearly 600 names are on display already, including one for Army Private First Class Brandon L. Buttry, from the city of Shenandoah, Iowa. That Shenandoah sits in Page County, Iowa.

The identical names are no accident.

Originally called Fair Oaks, the city of Shenandoah, Iowa, took its permanent name on Aug. 6, 1870, after soldiers returning from the Civil War saw a striking resemblance to the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, according to the Daughters of the American Revolution. Roudabush said those soldiers petitioned for their town’s name to be changed to Shenandoah and their county to be called Page.

The two Shenandoahs connected again several years ago when a family from Iowa visiting the Virginia town purchased a brick to recognize Buttry, who was killed in Afghanistan in 2012. The soldier’s place in the Veterans Park is another example of Shenandoah, Virginia, doing something for an unfamiliar family.

“We are so very sorry for your loss of this courageous and heroic young man. Please know we also grieve with you in your loss,” Lucas wrote to Iowa resident Carolyn Ruhde, who purchased the brick.

“They please everyone in the Town of Shenandoah will be eternally grateful for Brandon’s service and sacrifice.”

For more information on the town’s Memorial Day activities, visit www.townofshenandoah.com.

Past Memorial Day Honorees at VFW

Marine Lance Cpl. Jason C. Redifer, 19, Stuarts Draft
Army Cpl. Adam J. Fargo, 22, Ruckersville
Army Pfc. Thomas R. Wilson, 21, Mauretown
Army Pfc. David H. Sharrett II, 27, Oakton
Marine Lance Cpl. Daniel Scott Resner Bubb, 19, Grottoes
Marine Lance Cpl. Jordan Chrobot, 24, Harrisonburg
Army Spc. Brian “Bucky” Anderson, 24, Broadway
Army Spc. Levi R. Nuncio, 24, Shenandoah/Harrisonburg
Army First Lt. Stephen Chase Prasnicki, 24, Lexington
Army Spc. Kyle P. Stoeckli, 21, Moseley
Army Spc. Caryn E. Nouv, 29, Newport News
Army Master Sgt. George A. Bannar Jr., 37, Orange
Army Sgt. Lyle D. Turnbull, 31, Norfolk
Marine Master Sgt. Thomas Saunders, 33, Williamsburg

The town secured donations to open Shenandoah Veterans Park on Virginia Avenue several years ago, honoring all branches of the military. Nearly 600 bricks with the names of veterans are displayed at the park.