

NOVEMBER 15, 2022

Family

familymedia.com

The Magazine For Military Families



HONORING THE FALLEN

Nonprofit Wreaths Across America
Places Wreaths On Veterans' Graves
During The Holiday Season

PAGE 20

Cover Story

By DONNA BOYLE SCHWARTZ

Headstones in cemeteries all across the United States tell the tales of veterans' service, sacrifice and sorrow, yet many of the fallen have no one left living to remember their stories. Thanks to the nonprofit, Wreaths Across America, many of these long-past servicemen and -women are honored each holiday season by volunteers placing natural evergreen wreaths on their graves.

In 2021, approximately 2.4 million veterans' wreaths were placed at 3,137 participating locations nationwide by more than 2 million volunteers; more than a third of the volunteers were children. At Arlington National Cemetery, the Wreaths Across America program had 66 tractor-trailers deliver more than 250,000 veterans' wreaths, placed by nearly 38,000 volunteers. Some 525 truckloads of wreaths were delivered across the country by hundreds of volunteer professional truck drivers driving donated equipment and fuel from approximately 390 carriers.

"Our goal is to help all Americans understand the cost of our freedom, and to learn the stories of those who served and sacrificed so that we can be free," explains Wreaths Across America's Executive Director Karen Worcester. "The purpose of the program is simple: Remember, Honor, Teach: Remember the fallen. Honor those that serve, and their families. Teach the next generation the value of freedom. This is our mission and the focus of everything we do.

"As the mission grows across the country, so does the awareness of our nation's service members, veterans, and families," she continues. "With every wreath sponsored and placed on a headstone of a U.S. service member, we encourage their name to be said out loud so that their memory lives on. Wreaths Across America provides a connection point for communities to come together and learn the stories, meet the families, and teach the next generation."

The organization grew out of a chance visit to Arlington National Cemetery by Wreaths Across America founder Morrill Worcester. Then a 12-year-old paper boy for the *Bangor Daily News*, Morrill won a trip to Washington, D.C. where Arlington National



Green holiday wreaths with red bows adorning veterans' headstones

HONORING THE FALLEN

Nonprofit Wreaths Across America Places Wreaths On Veterans' Graves During The Holiday Season

Cemetery inspired him and served as a consistent reminder throughout his career and life that opportunities stemmed from the values and freedom of the nation's veterans.

Fast-forward to 1992 when Morrill's Harrington, Maine-based Worcester Wreath Company found itself with a surplus. He enlisted the aid of Maine Senator Olympia Snowe (ret.) in contacting Arlington National Cemetery for permission, Bluebird Ranch trucking company to haul the wreaths, and a handful of volunteers from The Maine State Society to place the first 5,000 wreaths in section 27, the oldest section of Arlington, where men and women who fought in the American Civil War are buried.

"The impact that placing a simple wreath on a white headstone and reading the names made on all who helped that day was humbling," Karen recalls. "Our family decided that if they would let us, we would make placing the wreaths an annual tradition. And we did just that." From 1992 until 2005, the Worcester Family provided the wreaths, Bluebird provided the transportation, and

The Maine State Society helped place the wreaths – each year in a different section of Arlington National Cemetery. "Each year names were read aloud, and the experience was an invaluable personal connection between the volunteers and the memory of those interred.

"In December 2005, the wreaths were once again being placed in section 27; it was also the first year that our youngest daughters and I were able to make the trip," Karen continues. "It was so emotional to walk the rows of stones, each one representing a life and a discussion with the girls about sacrifice and the cost of freedom. That year a light snow had fallen, the ground was white and the green wreaths with red bows were beautiful against the stones. A Pentagon photographer took a picture and shared it on the web."

The photo became a viral internet sensation, prompting thousands of requests from people wanting to emulate the Arlington example. Hence, Wreaths Across America was formed as a national nonprofit in 2007.

“Wreaths Across America receives no government funding,” Karen notes. “National Wreaths Across America Day and other events are made possible by thousands of volunteers who organize



local ceremonies, raise funds to sponsor wreaths and participate in the events. Individual wreath sponsors and corporate donors pay for most of the cost for the program and volunteer truck drivers and trucking companies make it possible for us to transport wreaths all over the country.”

The organization also created a Group Sponsorship Program, allowing other non-profits, civic groups, and organizations to sell \$15 wreath sponsorships for Wreaths Across America and earn \$5 back on each one to use to support their own missions and efforts in their communities. The first Group Sponsor was the Civil Air Patrol, of which the Worcester’s children were members; there are now more than 5,000 participating groups nationwide made up of veterans service organizations, youth and civic groups, American Legions, VFWs, and more. “Since 2007, Wreaths Across America has given back just over \$18 million to these groups,” Karen shared. “The program helps our program grow across the country, while helping these other groups to fund their own programs to support veterans, military families, education programs and more in their communities.”

Family is at the heart of all the Worcester enterprises. “The Worcester family is large and close-knit; without doubt, my husband Morrill has always been our guiding force,” Karen relates. “Our six kids were raised to be kind, do what is right and work hard. Our nine grandchildren are on track to display those characteristics in the next generation. Although he never served in the military, Morrill instilled in our family a love of country, patriotism, and faith. We are very proud of our son-in-law who is currently serving



Picture Insert: Wreaths Across America’s Executive Director Karen Worcester; Above: Wreaths Across America’s logo, highlighting the organization’s pillars: Remember, Honor, Teach.

our country as a lieutenant colonel in the Marine Corps.”

The patriotic Worcester’s also are in the process of building Flagpole of Freedom Park, a \$1 billion patriotic theme park that will feature the world’s tallest flagpole, a 1,461-foot spire soaring a symbolic 1,776 feet above sea level, to honor the more than 24 million American veterans who have served since the Revolutionary War. (Look for our feature on Flagpole of Freedom Park in last month’s October issue of FAMILY!)

The organization also is working hard to honor and support military families and veterans of more recent conflicts, including Vietnam. “For Vietnam-era Veterans, the challenge is healing,” Karen states. “They were not welcomed home or honored for their service. Through our partnership with the United States of America Vietnam War Commemoration, we work to identify Vietnam veterans, and properly welcome them home and honor their service. Since becoming a Commemorative Partner in 2017, we’ve welcomed home more than 3,000 Vietnam veterans.

“For military families, they need to know their country and community support them and are grateful for their sacrifice,” she continues. “When someone serves our country, their whole family serves. And unless you are from a military family, very few

Americans know what it means to serve. We hope to share the stories of families to help teach the country about service and true sacrifice.

“I have had the privilege and honor of meeting many Gold Star Families and veterans through my time as Executive Director and to personally experience the impact that placing a wreath can have on a person, and a family,” she adds. “The first year that we invited Gold Star Mothers to join us in our trip to deliver wreaths from Maine to Arlington, I was so nervous, thinking, ‘What could I possibly say to these women who had lost their children in service to our country?’

“But when they arrived, I realized very quickly that these women, like me, were moms. They wanted to share stories of their children’s LIVES, not their deaths. I too talked about my own kids, and conversation was easy and poignant. I think it was that experience that truly solidified for me the importance of sharing stories, and our obligation to do just that, for their families and all those like them, to know that their sacrifice is honored, and the next generation learns the true cost of freedom.”

For more information, tune in to Wreaths Across America Radio on iHeart or Audacy; or visit the group’s website at: <https://www.wreathscrossamerica.org/>