

Our Heroes' Tree: Honoring Veterans in Senior Care and Hospice Environments

By Marlene Lee, MA, Thanatology

Our Heroes' Tree (ourheroestree.com) publicly acknowledges and honors the service, sacrifice, and deployment separation of current and former U.S. service members. The community engagement program can readily be implemented in senior care environments, such as senior living facilities and nursing homes, and in hospice in support of "We Honor Veterans," a collaborative initiative between the Veterans Administration and the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization.

With its themes of *Reflect ~ Remember ~ Rejoice*—Our Heroes' Tree promotes beneficial effects in six thanatology (death, dying, and bereavement) categories relevant to senior care and hospice. Refer to the next page titled, *Focusing on Military Service through Our Heroes' Tree*.

The value of Our Heroes' Tree programming within the senior care and hospice communities is multi-dimensional, benefitting those who have served in uniform, as well as their families, caregivers, friends, and visitors. Moreover, staff in medical and community organizations also report feeling uplifted and inspired by Our Heroes' Tree programming, both for themselves individually and in observing and interacting with participants during and after program events.

The selection of a tree as the literal and metaphorical foundation for Our Heroes' Tree is based on symbolism representing the journey of life and meanings that are familiar to military culture, such as:

- Family roots and legacy
- New growth and regrowth
- "Bloom where you are planted" (representing multiple moves)
- Strength, resilience, endurance
- Individual strength within the ecosystem of the "forest" (unit, crew, wing, platoon, etc.)



A seemingly simple act of creating a memento-ornament in recognition of someone's military service, and displaying it on Our Heroes' Tree, results in a memorable opportunity to honor service members of all branches, all generations, and all aspects of service (wartime, peacetime, Active Duty, National Guard, and Reserve).

Since 2005, thousands of memento-ornaments have been displayed on Our Heroes' Trees in more than 30 states and on U.S. military bases in 10 countries—from postcard notes tied with patriotic ribbon to old photos to decorative World War II-era streamers, and even a glass orb filled with sand from Normandy Beach (see photo)—creativity abounds.

To engage participants, ask leading questions using the themes of Our Heroes' Tree:

- *Reflect:* Have you or a loved one served in the U.S. Armed Forces? What is their name and relationship to you?
- *Remember:* Describe what feels meaningful to you about your or their time in uniform?
- *Rejoice:* If you could share a message to honor and remember the person, what would you like to say? What would a memento-ornament look like?

Focusing on Military Service through Our Heroes' Tree Our Heroes' Tree Themes: <i>Reflect ~ Remember ~ Rejoice</i>		
Thanatology Category	Unique Aspects of Having Served in the U.S. Armed Forces	Our Heroes' Tree Activity
Identify those who served in the U.S. Armed Forces	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Military service as a distinctive time in one's life • Military culture, service, and sacrifice • Impact to senior care and end-of-life issues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognize and honor the military service, inclusive of all branches, components (Active Duty, National Guard, Reserve), and roles (wartime, peacetime, front lines, support, etc.) • Create memento (e.g., ornament, postcard note) to honor service • Respect the individual
Life review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effect of military service on one's life • Generational cohorts: WWII generations did not typically talk about their experiences; the Korean War was nicknamed "The Forgotten War"; Vietnam generation reconciling their experiences and changing the face of senior and end-of-life care as "Baby Boomers" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication and authentic listening: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reflect on and share life story - Tell the story at their own pace - Privilege and an honor to listen to their stories • Does a message of the heart need to be communicated? Four gifts: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "I love(d) you"; "Please forgive me"; "I forgive you"; and "Goodbye" • Incorporate religious aspects for spiritual support
Remembering others in one's life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remembering loved ones • Grief over battle buddies and deaths in the unit during or after, such as suicide after returning home • Survivor guilt 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create memento (e.g., ornament, postcard note) to honor and remember others, inclusive of manner of death
Caregiver and family involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Families may or may not be familiar with the service member's history and impact on his/her life 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Families, friends, and others are an integral part of the program and can participate individually as well as on behalf of the hospice person • Acknowledge disenfranchised grief • Acknowledge ambiguous loss • Create memento (e.g., ornament, postcard note)
Therapeutic recreation and art therapy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adapt program activities based on service member's self-view, such as generational cohort, perspective on time in service • In honor or in memoriam 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adapt program and creative art activities based on individuals' capabilities (energy levels, mobility and dexterity, end-of-life trajectory) • Adapt program activities to organization
Memory recall for Alzheimer's patients through music and photographs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Music serves as a powerful memory maker and memory recall; military music comprises its own genre • Photographs can evoke memories of people, places, and time gone by 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incorporate songs and music into the program: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Military branch theme songs (e.g., U.S. Navy's <i>Anchors Aweigh</i>) - Patriotic songs (e.g., National Anthem; God Bless America) - Popular music from the military era such as swing dance, big band music
Refer to the <i>Planning Guide for Our Heroes' Tree</i> , available from the website: ourheroestree.com		

Currently, 25 percent of all deaths in the U.S. are Veterans; and 96 percent of Veterans are cared for at the end-of-life in their local communities (and not by the Veterans Administration). To honor Veterans in a variety of senior living, nursing care, and hospice environments, Our Heroes' Tree programming is flexible and adaptable; the program may be shared as part of the larger group, facility, or community, or it may be more appropriate to honor an individual privately or at home.

According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs statistics, 16 million Americans served in World War II, and only 558,000 are alive in 2017. Korean War Veterans are aging into their 80's and as the "Baby Boomers" of the cold war and the Vietnam War era age up, they are expected to significantly impact senior and end-of-life care. Age is not the driving factor for hosting Our Heroes' Tree—their life stories are.

About the author



Marlene Lee is the author of *The Hero in My Pocket* and co-author of *That's My Hope* and *Our Heroes' Tree* (e-book). She also authored the essay, *I Don't Know What to Say: Supporting Someone Who is Grieving*, available as a free download on the website: ourheroestree.com/.

A Planning Guide for Our Heroes' Tree is also available via the website.

Marlene was recognized for volunteer service at (the former) Walter Reed Army Medical Center, and was named National Capital Area, American Red Cross Volunteer of the Year, Disaster Support Services.

She earned an MA in Thanatology from Hood College and a BA in Communications from the University of Maryland.

Our Heroes' Tree was co-founded in 2005 by Marlene, whose son serves on active duty in the U.S. Army, and Stephanie Pickup, whose husband formerly served on active duty in the U.S. Army.



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