

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. Notably, 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.

Our Heroes' Tree features symbolism that represents 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" (symbolizing multiple moves)
- Strength, resilience, endurance
- Individual strength within the ecosystem of the "forest" (unit, crew, wing, platoon, etc.)



The 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 the program began in 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 people to participate, 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?

The cost to implement the program is nominal using small U.S. flags, yellow or patriotic-themed ribbon, simple craft supplies, and a tree. The *Planning Guide for Our Heroes' Tree* contains detailed checklists and creative suggestions and is available at no charge via the website: ourheroestree.com/.

Focusing on Military Service through Our Heroes' Tree Reflect ~ Remember ~ Rejoice	
UNIQUE ASPECTS OF HAVING SERVED IN THE U.S. ARMED FORCES	OUR HEROES' TREE ACTIVITY Website: www.ourheroestree.com
RECOGNIZE 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 and respect the individual
LIFE REVIEW	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meaning of military service to 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
FAMILY, CAREGIVER OR STAFF INVOLVEMENT	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Families may or may not be familiar with the service member's history and meaning to 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 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

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

Citizens Care and Rehabilitation Center and Montevue Assisted Living (*Citizens/Montevue*), in Frederick, Maryland, jointly hosted Our Heroes' Tree in 2018 and agreed to share their "8 Lessons Learned."

1. Start planning early! *Citizens/Montevue* began planning in August for an early February event.
2. Select a date that offers a unique recognition opportunity for Veterans. *Citizens/Montevue* recommends considering a month other than in deep winter in snowy geographies.
3. *Citizens/Montevue* extended its reach with the program by partnering with Hospice of Frederick County and engaging the organization's Veteran Liaison.
4. Plan two to four arts and crafts sessions with residents/patients to create ornament-mementos (therapeutic recreation and art therapy). *Citizens/Montevue* encouraged intergenerational participation and included families, caregivers, and staff in the art sessions and the event.
5. Decorate an artificial tree or a paper tree on a wall (and check secondhand stores for deals on artificial trees!). *Citizens/Montevue* hung memento-ornaments on two artificial trees for three months, from December through February.
6. The event at *Citizens/Montevue* featured patriotic music and music from the 1940's – music serves as a powerful therapeutic and memory recall technique. Residents began reminiscing and chair-bound residents swayed to the music, tapped their feet, and enjoyed the music of their era.
7. *Citizens/Montevue* used the easy-to-follow *Planning Guide for Our Heroes' Tree*, available at no charge from Our Heroes' Tree website (ourheroestree.com).
8. Have an instant camera on hand! *Citizens/Montevue* did not do this and wishes they had. With an instant camera, participants could be given a photo to take with them as they leave the event.

According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs statistics, 16 million Americans served in World War II, and less than 558,000 were 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.

Veterans' ages are not the driving factor for hosting Our Heroes' Tree—it's their service, their sacrifice, their life stories. And their legacy to our nation.

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.

