

By Alan Reed

Roughrider Honor Flight Treasurer Doug Prchal knows what to expect when he goes to the post office the first of each month.

“A couple of fellows made a commitment at the beginning of sending \$20 each month. First of the month, go to the post office and there is their envelope,” Prchal said.

Large and small contributions that total nearly \$1 million overall during the past two years have made it possible for five flights of World War II veterans with North Dakota ties to see the National World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C. When the final Roughrider Honor Flight takes to the air on May 6 from the Bismarck Airport, over 500 WW II vets will have experienced this memorable trip at absolutely no cost to them.

“These people went to war for a reason far beyond themselves. And they came back, and many of them will say this, thinking they didn’t do anything special,” Roughrider Honor Flight Chairman Kevin Cramer said.

This inherent humility, combined with a genuine public recognition of the sacrifices made by WW II veterans and their families, makes an effort like the honor flight a cause that is universally respected, Cramer said.

Cramer oversaw the fundraising for all five Roughrider Honor Flights. He is no stranger to this role, having raised numerous dollars for his own political campaigns, lots of charities and other efforts.

“There is not a person who listens to me who says that is a terrible idea,” Cramer said of raising funds to take WW II veterans to see their memorial.

Cramer shares his stories about the veterans he’s met or the trip in general.

“What happens is people are so moved by the gratitude shown by the veterans,” he said. “One of the things that is so interesting to me is these men and women, it’s largely men, are almost confused by the generosity...by the affection they receive. When you see that, you are all that more compelled to do more.”

Prchal said it costs roughly \$165,000 for each flight, but this final flight is approaching \$200,000.

“We’re taking about 40 more veterans on this trip. We took 87 last time,” Prchal said. “We have raised this money each time. There is no state money involved, no federal money.”

The committee created sponsorship opportunities for the flights, beginning with the “bronze” level of \$0-\$999. Prchal said 720 individuals have donated at that level. Another 75 individuals donated at the “Adopt-a-Vet” level of \$1,000, and there have been hundreds of other donations.

“There are family connections. School groups from Walhalla to South Heart have undertaken this effort,” Prchal said.

Contributions from business “Jeans Day” in various cities, veteran and community groups and even family memorials have all helped to fund the flights, he said.

“We have done campaigns where we have said we’re approaching an honor flight and we’re short,” he said. “Every time, people have responded.”

Jonathan Long of BNSF Railway is one such person who has responded. Cramer approached Long during a visit in Bismarck, which included an opportunity for Long to attend a Roughrider Honor Flight organizational meeting.

At the end of the meeting, Long told the committee to call him if it needed help. Tara Holt, the committee’s vice president, called him and Long ultimately became a committee member.

“It’s an honor and a privilege for me. If it wasn’t for the guys in WW II, I wouldn’t have freedoms that I have today,” Long said.

He said the flights have provided a wonderful opportunity to meet these veterans.

“If I had my way, everybody would get to do it,” Long said of the flight. “You make friends for life.”

Long went on one of the honor flights, which gave him the opportunity to bond with a veteran named George.

“When we got off the plane in Bismarck, he waited for me to come out. He wanted a picture,” Long said. “So I got a picture with George and his daughter and family and it was a wonderful experience. You try to stay in contact with these folks.”

BNSF also provided funding for the flights, as Long said railroads over history sometimes have received a black eye for being the big bad guy that got its way with everything.

“This is one way where we can change that opinion greatly,” Long said. “Getting the corporate funding is huge and that is where Kevin Cramer does such a wonderful job.”

John DiDonato, NextEra Energy Resources vice-president of development in Juno Beach, Fla., said it didn’t take long to get behind the honor flight when Cramer approached the national energy provider. DiDonato said one of its core values is respect for the individual.

“And how can you not respect what I would consider the bravest generation in the history of our country,” he said of WW II veterans.

DiDonato said WW II veterans deserve the opportunity to see the monument that was built for them. While he has not had the opportunity to fly with the Roughrider Honor Flight, DiDonato and his daughter did see an honor flight from another state in Washington, D.C. They saw the group during the changing of the guard at Arlington National Cemetery.

“The looks on the faces of the guys is just amazing, priceless,” he said. “You can sense how much pride they feel in everything.”

DiDonato has received indirect feedback about the Roughrider Honor Flights and said Cramer does a great job of sharing insights from the trips. Some of the most impressive feedback for DiDonato is reading what students have written to WW II veterans.

“How students today recognize the sacrifice (veterans) made and expressing their gratitude from them,” DiDonato said.

He’s also seen videos from honor flight trips, which have been very touching.

“It’s hard to watch that without feeling your heart in your throat,” DiDonato said.

He encourages anyone who has the means to support an honor flight to do so.

“We get requests from a lot of not-for-profit organizations. We have to turn down a lot,” he said. “When you look at what this is about, how much of the actual contribution goes toward the event, this is close to the best use of a dollar you can find.”

Holt also approached the North Dakota Community Foundation to act as the fiscal sponsor for the honor flight.

“It has really made a big difference in how we have been able to do business, and they also contributed to the cause,” Holt said.

Prchal said the foundation does all of the receipting for the honor flight. He then collects those receipts to contact the donors and reaffirm the committee has received their money.

The positive feedback that’s shared by the veterans themselves when they return from a flight, however, goes a long way in helping to raise the needed dollars, Prchal said.

“They sell us, the program, when they go back home. Then the ladies auxiliaries, the veterans groups and others come forward,” he said. “The patriotism is what drives that. That is truly what is behind that.”