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As membership drops, McFarland Legion Post 534 looks to engage younger generations

By Mike Klawitter mklawitter@hngnews.com

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American flags fly at the American Legion in McFarland on Nov. 12, the day after Veterans Day.

By Jacob Swanson

Storm clouds are on the horizon for the American Legion Post 534 in McFarland.



The organization raises funds to benefit the community, sponsors the Memorial Day parade and other public events and holds ceremonies on Memorial Day and Veterans Day to honor soldiers who have served in the U.S. Armed Forces or gave their lives in battle. The post serves as a social outlet for veterans and their families and periodically hosts weddings and dances.

Yet, membership has been falling.

At the beginning of 2020, the group had 306 members. Toward the end of the year, the number had fallen to 280. Thirteen have passed away, two transferred to other posts and some have moved out of the area.



“When you look at the age of our membership, I’m afraid it’s only going to get worse,” said 74-year-old Jim Wickert, who is the post’s first vice-commander. “I’m one of the younger guys.”

The National Veterans Foundation in Los Angeles reports that more than two million Korean War veterans are still alive, but with most of the war’s participants 80 years and older, the number is starting to dwindle. While the record keeping is questionable, statistics show that about three million Americans served in Vietnam, with about one-third of that number still alive. In recent years, some Gulf War and Iraq War veterans have joined the American Legion, but participation has still diminished.

“The community as a whole is probably not aware of the depth and breadth of our contributions,” said Joe Larson, commander of the Sons of the American Legion (SAL). “However, those who benefit from our support would miss us dearly.”

Mike Mietz, Post 534 adjutant, fears the American Legion may become irrelevant if its membership doesn't increase. He said he thinks the Legion should begin to consider a plan to ensure the Avenue of Flags Memorial at the south end of the Legion building is protected and can never be destroyed for development should the Post not be around 15 years from now.

“However, I believe Post 534 is working hard with a core of our young members to reconnect with the community and bring the post back to have a much greater presence once again in the future,” Mietz said.

Yet, to accomplish that, Mietz said it needs to make itself more appealing to younger generations and do away with the perception the American Legion only appeals to elderly veterans. He said Post 534 has about 40 Korean and 170 Vietnam veterans, many in their 70s and 80s. Less than fifty members are under the age of 50.

“We are working very hard to attract younger members who want to be involved. We are not interested in just adding members for numbers. We have an active committee of younger members looking at ideas on outreach,” Mietz said. “It is very encouraging. We also have a communication committee developing processes and policies for communication to members and the community via multiple means of mass-media communication.”

Mietz said Post 534 has established a new Constant Contact email service that sends messages to 370 of the 550 Legion family members to keep them informed of American Legion-related news.

Another obstacle toward getting newer, younger members relates to societal changes that have occurred for several decades.



In the years after World War II, very few homes had television sets. Local American Legion posts sponsored baseball teams for high school athletes and supported groups such as the Boy Scouts of America. More people donated their time to support different causes. These efforts led to development of valuable friendships for both the young and old and kept volunteerism strong.

Today, home computers, hand-held devices and video games are primary sources of entertainment. Children are active in organized pursuits relating to sports, music and theater, all with demanding schedules. Parents and children are no longer able to volunteer due to a scarcity of free time. This has trickled down into the local American Legion posts.

“Over the last 10 years, we have stopped doing so many things, we are nothing compared to what we were 20 years ago,” Mietz said. “The community knew who we were and what we did, often asking us for support. We need to get back there again and we are addressing that. I admit with grandchildren in high school, one a senior and the other a sophomore, kids’ schedules seem to be worse, and it seems parents have much more to contend with. There is always something going on. The post still does a lot, and it should be proud of what it does. We do support the community; we just do a poor job letting our presence be known.”

Larson said people may not be aware of activities involving Post 534: donations to the police and fire departments, and the McFarland Food Pantry, the Christmas in the Village craft shop, Stuff the Bus to benefit children in need of school supplies and \$4,000 scholarships to two high school seniors. The Post also provides high school graduation flags, middle school awards, and street and cemetery flags. It opens its doors to activities conducted by the high school baseball and football teams, and the middle school dance team.

Additionally, the post supports activities such as Take-A-Vet Fishing, Badger Honor Flight and Camp American Legion. The Boys and Girls Scouts of America both receive assistance along with the Wounded Warrior Project, King Veterans Home

and the VA Hospital and Beacon for homeless veterans. Care packages are sent to deployed military personnel.

Last September, the Post dedicated its Avenue of Flags to Darrel Krenz, a Korean War veteran who spearheaded the fundraising and placement of the 107 flag poles that honor deceased local veterans.

Nate Weier, the second vice-commander at Post 534, encourages people to participate in one of the Legion's three branches: the American Legion for those who served in the armed forces, the American Legion Auxiliary for mothers, male or female spouses of veterans and female descendants of those who served and the Sons of the American Legion, which is geared toward male descendants of veterans. All are dedicated to community service.

"The legion is a great way to give back while having the opportunity to socialize with fellow former service members and veterans," Weier said. "There have been numerous times where I have had a long week, and being around fellow members of the legion has boosted my spirits. It is a special kind of comradery that I am sure would be quite useful to many area veterans."

Mietz said Legion dues are \$35 annually, and there are ways to sign up as a life member without having to pay annually. He said the atmosphere of the Legion is very welcoming.

"People will have no pressure to have to be saddled with commitments or we will not apply any pressure to being actively involved," he said. "Let them settle in, see what is going on, have a solid path of communication about what is happening and let them participate at their own rate. Most importantly, make them feel welcome. Listen to their ideas."

