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Gold Star Families to be honored at annual Tribute to the Troops concert

By Pippa Fisher



Citizen of the Year Robin Holt, left and Joan Cox at last year's concert. Photo provided

the Gold Star families.

Families will have a chance to relax together, bring a picnic, enjoy great patriotic music and, most importantly, honor all who currently serve or have served in the military, especially those Gold Star families whose loved ones have paid the ultimate sacrifice, during the fourth annual Tribute to the Troops concert beginning at 5 p.m. July 15 at the Lafayette Reservoir.

The event will feature The Big Band of Rossmoor and Midnight Flyer, an Eagles cover band. Those attending are encouraged to bring a picnic and settle in on blankets with their families to relax and show appreciation for all that the troops, past and present, do to keep them safe.

Lafayette Police Chief Eric Christensen, himself a U.S. Army veteran, will serve as the master of ceremonies, Lafayette Boy Scout Troop 243 will post the colors, and Lafayette resident Yolanda Vega will speak on behalf of

Vega, whose son Senior Airman Jonathan (Jake) Vega Yelner died in 2008 after the vehicle he was driving was struck by an improvised explosive device in Afghanistan, now works tirelessly on behalf of Gold Star families to raise awareness.

Jake, as he was known, was 24 when he died. He grew up with his brother in Lafayette, attending St. Perpetua School and De La Salle High School.

Another of the 23 fallen heroes being remembered from Contra Costa County is Campolindo High School graduate Captain Mark Paine, who was killed at age 32 when his Humvee was hit by an IED in Iraq.

For most people, Vega reflects, the thought of their child not being part of their lives is difficult to comprehend. "I am sure they wonder how we now live our lives," she says. "I struggle with it."

Vega says, "I am a Gold Star Family member. We are the mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters and relatives left behind when our child is killed or dies while serving in military duty."

Lafayette businessman and co-director for The Big Band of Rossmoor, Mo Levich, is the organizing force behind the scenes for this event, in collaboration with the Lafayette Chamber of Commerce, the Rotary Club of Lafayette and the City of Lafayette.

Coming from Sioux City, Iowa, Levich says he grew up with summer picnics on a lawn at a band stage - kids and parents experiencing outdoor food and music. Four years ago he and Lafayette Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Jay Lifson had a vision of bringing the community together for that sort of event - a picnic and the music of The Big Band of Rossmoor.

"Patriotic as we are, we both decided to find a way to say thanks to our troops," says Levich. "We see cemeteries but where can we say thanks? Where could we honor those who have provided our freedom, both past and present? Who do we thank and how? Where do we ever sing 'God Bless America' as a community?"

And so this Tribute to the Troops concert at the Res was born. The show attracted about 800 people the first year.

Levich plays the trumpet and has been with the Big Band for 22 years. The band is a multi-generational group with members ranging in age from 13 to 93.

World War II veteran and Big Band member Bob Sutherland will be playing trumpet at the concert and is looking forward to performing "My Secret Heart" as a duet with one of the younger clarinet players.

Sutherland served at age 19 in the Army Air Corps from November 1942 to October 1945, initially based near Chichester, England, working with British air-sea rescue, and then for 21 months in Europe.

Sutherland has been playing trumpet with The Big Band for almost 30 years and is a 35-year resident of Rossmoor. He credits his long life and good health to playing the trumpet, which he says expands the lungs.

"I am happy to get a chance to support and play some music and appreciate the veterans for their service," says Sutherland.

As well as reading the names of the 23 fallen from Contra Costa County since 9/11, 17 from Alameda County will also be recognized.

In addition to Gold Star families, also represented at the concert will be Blue Star Moms, the Marines Memorial Club of San Francisco, Rides for Veterans, the Mobile Vet Center, Veterans of Foreign Wars and many other groups who will honor veterans from WWII, Korea, Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as active duty military personnel.

Residents should plan on bringing their own food to enjoy. The concert will take place on the stage a short walk east of the parking lot. Golf cart transportation will be provided for those who require assistance.

"Jay and I are happy that we have a way to say thanks," says Levich. "Thanks to all who have served and thanks to those who were in harm's way and thanks to the Gold Star Families for the ultimate sacrifice - thanks with our hearts and prayers."

For Vega, events such as the Tribute to the Troops provides soothing. "Knowing that our children's sacrifice will not be forgotten.

"For us, that is our request - don't forget our children."



Photo provided

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