

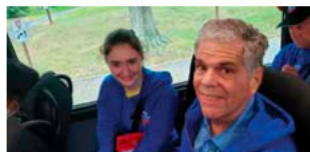
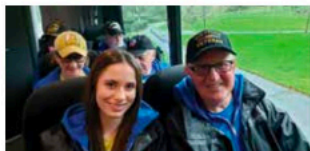
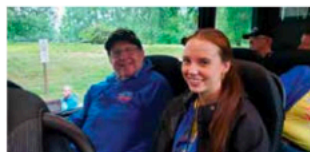
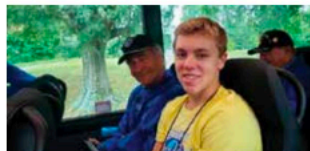
SALUTING AMERICA'S HEROES

Four North Shore teens served as guardians for veterans on the most recent Lake County Honor Flight.

BY MITCH HURST
THE NORTH SHORE WEEKEND

When Kathryn Petty's girls were young, she began taking them to Midway Airport to welcome veterans home from Lake County Honor Flights to Washington, D.C. She wanted her daughters to understand and appreciate the sacrifices veterans have made to contribute to our freedoms. It's a tradition that has carried on for more than 10 years.

The ritual led Petty and her youngest daughter, Nora, to join a mission of their own last month, accompanying veterans on the 23rd Lake County Honor Flight. Three other local teens—Timothy Rukavina, Teresa Claire Gerber, and Caroline Gerber—also participated in the flight.



North Shore teens pictured with veterans in Washington, D.C.

The four high school students each raised \$1,400, mostly from local businesses, to cover the expenses for themselves and the veterans for which they served as guardians.

"One reason we started welcoming honor

flights was partly to show them who the real celebrities are, or should be," Kathryn says. "The pomp at the homecomings is so incredible, you'd think Taylor Swift was getting off of the plane. One of the things Lake County Honor Flight does so well is overwhelm the veterans with love and gratitude, which then provides a fertile ground for healing to take place."

Petty says it was Rukavina who first planted the seed for the teens (all seniors at Lake Forest High School tutoring for the ACT with Kathryn at College of Lake County) to participate in the honor flight. Rukavina aims to attend the Air Force Academy, and he was looking for a way to honor veterans in addition to welcoming them home from their flights.

"The trip was an amazing experience and I had so much fun connecting with my guardian, Arnold Greenfield. He served in the Navy during Vietnam and shared many stories about being sent on a little boat for three weeks," Rukavina says. "I had a lot of laughs with other veterans and guardians, and I also was honored to share with them that I was applying to the Air Force Academy."

"It's a very long application process but after taking a tour there, I realized it is a one-of-a-kind place where I can further my disciplined mentality and proudly serve my country afterward."

Kathryn says it was lovely to watch the banter between the veterans and the teens, and they quickly took to each other during the trip. There was a lot of laughter, and the veterans loved teasing the kids in a playful way.

"The kids thought the veterans were absolutely hilarious. They were just crying, laughing so hard sometimes," Kathryn says. "Of course, some very serious, somber things were shared too. The kids have received notes and gifts from the veterans. One of the really amazing things to see was intergenerational friendships come about, which you wouldn't expect."

Teresa Claire Gerber, who joined the Honor Flight with her twin sister, Caroline, says she wanted to get involved with Lake County Honor Flight to show her appreciation and give back to the brave men and women who made sacrifices for our country.

"I love that the Honor Flight chapter of Lake County goes on a three-day trip, which allowed me to form a wonderful friendship with my veteran and many others," Teresa says. "During the trip, I got to hear stories



Lake Forest High School students served as guardians for military veterans last month on Lake County Honor Flight 23.

about their time in the war, their experiences, and their return home. Many stories left me shocked and made me even more thankful for the Honor Flight program for allowing veterans the chance to be properly honored."

Teresa says she was impressed with all the planning and detail that went into the trip. Everything was thought out to make the trip meaningful and special for each veteran. From the moment they stepped off the plane, the veterans were showered with praise; everyone in the airport was clapping, shaking their hands, and thanking them.

"The whole experience was very powerful and moving. I am proud of what these veterans did for our country and grateful to have gotten to be a part of honoring their service," she says. "It was one of the most amazing experiences I have had in my life, one that I will always remember."

Teresa's twin sister, Caroline, says that in addition to raising funds for the Honor Flight the high schoolers also collected hundreds of gratitude letters from classmates at Lake Forest High School and other local schools. She was thankful for the opportunity to share her appreciation to the veterans.

"Over the three days on Honor Flight 23 we developed a true sense of camaraderie with the veterans. Though we met as strangers, we parted as family," Caroline says. "Through our shared experience we forged bonds that transcended the decades between us."

Caroline says she felt compelled to participate in the Honor Flight because she believes that Americans are indebted to the men and

women who have served, and it is our responsibility to try and repay that debt.

"I volunteered to become a guardian on Honor Flight because I wanted to serve those who have served for us and recognize their courage and the sacrifices they made on our behalf," she says. "Being on an Honor Flight was an incredible, once-in-a-lifetime experience. I learned more about history from the real-life recounts of the veterans than I have ever learned from a book or a movie."

Kathryn's daughter, Nora, says she wanted to attend Honor Flight and serve as a guardian to show veterans from the Vietnam War, in particular, that they are appreciated. Vietnam veterans were disrespected and mistreated, and she wanted to show them, not just tell them, that they are worthy of respect and gratitude.

"Serving as a guardian was a way for me to show them the appreciation that they seldom got from the public upon coming home," Nora says. "I enjoyed every minute of the trip—not just because I was getting to serve those who have served me, but because of the people on the trip."

The veterans made the trip fun and memorable, she says, and she already misses the those she was fortunate enough to spend time with.

"It proves their humble character that when asked about their service, they made light of their sacrifices," she says. "I think the way that they downplay what they did for our country is the best testament to their character. Their joyful smiles on the trip made it worth it for me."