

A mission of thanks to our veterans

The two DC-9s touched down in Washington, D.C., carrying 32 seniors and 71 of their supporters on an important mission, Operation Enduring Thanks. The planes, loaded with equipment and supplies, brought the group to Washington on June 4, 2005, to give these seniors—World War II veterans, veterans' spouses, and those who served on the home front—a chance to see the newly dedicated National World War II Memorial.

Lutheran Homes of Michigan planned and deployed the 103-person operation, which also included seniors' family members, approximately 40 direct caregivers from Lutheran Homes, and members of the organization's administration. Lutheran Homes operates five sites in mid-Michigan, including skilled nursing and assisted living facilities and a CCRC campus. The organization, which has been in service since 1893, serves 900 seniors daily.

In May 2004, as the country was preparing to dedicate the National World War II Memorial on Memorial Day, Lutheran Homes began to reflect on the memorial's opening. "The 60-year time lag for us as a nation to create this lasting memorial was *extremely* unfortunate because so many of that generation would never be able to see it," says David Gehm, president and CEO of Lutheran Homes of Michigan.

Lutheran Homes' administration was reminded of its own veterans and wondered how many it had in its programs and facilities. Gehm thought it was a shame that those veterans might never see their new memorial. "That thought quickly turned into a discussion—maybe we could get them there," Gehm recalls. The idea was proposed to Lutheran Homes' staff leadership team and board of directors, who im-



Veteran John Vieu (seated) and his son Richard share a special moment at the memorial.



Operation Enduring Thanks veterans and others observe the Changing of the Guard at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, Arlington National Cemetery.

A collaboration of the American Association of Homes and Services for the Aging and *Nursing Homes/Long Term Care Management Not-for-Profit Report*, appearing in every issue of *Nursing Homes* magazine, addresses issues of particular interest to long-term care's not-for-profit sector. It provides nonprofit aging service providers with an additional information resource. Topics have been identified in collaboration with the American Association of Homes and Services for the Aging. *Nursing Homes* welcomes comments and suggestions for future coverage.



Many of the veterans were approached by “strangers” who wanted to thank them personally. Veteran Albert Sidney (seated) is accompanied by volunteer Karen Storck (on his right) and staff member Gary Kamin (on his left).

mediately approved a trip dubbed Operation Enduring Thanks. “We made the commitment, frankly, long before we had any answers to a lot of the questions that came up later,” he says.

The administration searched its facilities and programs for seniors who had been involved in the war effort and invited them on the pilgrimage to the memorial. The 32 seniors who chose to go included veterans, nurses, spouses of veterans, and those on the home front, including a “Rosie the Riveter,” one of six million women who worked manufacturing and industrial jobs during the war. One woman who came on the trip lost her husband on D-Day. “It was an important moment of closure for her,” Gehm notes.

Lutheran Homes made sure that money wouldn’t be a reason for anyone to skip the trip. “When we first posed this idea to our veterans and other residents, we told them that this trip would be courtesy of the community, which owes them thanks. We told them that they were being invited to go regardless of their ability to pay, and regardless of whatever their frailty or level of healthcare needs,” Gehm says. “For various reasons, some chose not to go—some because they didn’t want to deal with those memories again, and others because of their health and frailty issues.”

The seniors’ family members were also invited; any family member who could not afford to pay for the trip would be covered, as well. Also, Lutheran Homes paid staff members’ travel expenses and a stipend for their service. Numerous fund-raisers supported Operation Enduring Thanks, and Thrivent Financial for Lutherans matched the funds generated. Lutheran Homes enlisted corporate sponsors and received significant contributions from individuals in the community. “The outpouring of support from the community really affirmed that this idea was the right thing to do,” Gehm says.

Lutheran Homes also published a cookbook featuring more than 500 recipes from veterans, friends of the organization, and

staff members. It includes WWII-era recipes, a history of the war, and stories and photos of some of Lutheran Homes’ veterans. The cookbook is available through Lutheran Homes’ Web site, www.lhminc.org.

Planning the journey proved to be a tremendous challenge. The group couldn’t be subjected to the rigors and schedules of flying commercially, so Lutheran Homes arranged to travel via two first-class DC-9 planes that are used primarily for charters, transporting high-profile sports teams around the country. Traveling in Washington would pose a problem, as well, as handicap-accessible busing for a group of this size was not readily available. So Lutheran Homes sent its own buses loaded with equipment to Washington a day ahead

of time, and the two parties met at the airport. And there were the little things that posed challenges. The trip would include outdoor activities, so the group would have to limit the amount of time spent in the June heat. Also, many residents did not have valid photo IDs, so Lutheran Homes had to secure them in a hurry.

Working with Best Bets Travel, an agency that caters exclusively to disability travel, Lutheran Homes made reservations at the Renaissance Washington, DC Hotel, which has an award-winning history of housing disabled visitors and is close to the memorial, which is near the National Mall.

The large group was scattered throughout the hotel, with three aides manning the night shifts and making rounds over the hotel’s 20-plus floors. The aides did not tour with the rest of the group; they rested during the day. The seniors roomed with staff members and family members so that a caregiver could be in the room with them at all times. Despite the number of staff who accompanied the veterans on Operation Enduring Thanks, Lutheran Homes did not feel a staffing burden at their facilities and in their programs in Michigan. “Staff back home really pulled together to cover for the folks who were away on the trip,” says Al Kaul, vice-president of service excellence at Lutheran Homes.

On the morning of June 5, the group arrived at the National World War II Memorial. Everyone posed for photos outside and then moved at their own pace through the memorial. The seniors wore T-shirts and caps identifying them as WWII veterans. “We had a lot of people from the public coming up to our veterans and shaking their hands and thanking them for their service to our country. Some grade school kids asked some of our veterans for autographs and asked to have pictures taken with them. That was really amazing to watch unfold,” Kaul says. He remembers an emotional scene at the memorial as people thanked the veterans:

“One of our veterans said no one had ever said thank you before.”

Another veteran, a Pearl Harbor survivor, was joined by two sons from Ohio and Alaska and a grandson going to school on the East Coast. At the memorial he met another Pearl Harbor survivor, who was not part of Operation Enduring Thanks, and even though the men didn't know each other, they shared a common bond. “When these two veterans and their families met, they reacted as if they were long-lost brothers,” Gehm says. The men shared memories and exchanged e-mail addresses.

In the afternoon, the group toured the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History, which features the exhibit *The Price of Freedom: Americans at War*. The museum dedicates a large portion of the exhibit to World War II and includes photos, quotes, and memorabilia. The veterans had begun telling stories at the memorial and continued doing so at the Smithsonian. Family members were,

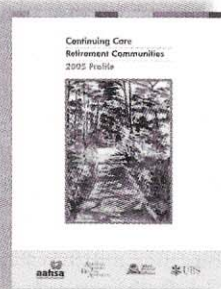


Dorothy Bierlein (seated), wife of veteran Duane Bierlein, and CNA Janette Bickel spend a quiet moment at the memorial's Freedom Wall.

in some cases, hearing stories from their veteran family members for the first time. “The family members were probably more visibly emotional than our veterans were, connecting with that family veteran in ways that they probably hadn't before,” Kaul notes.

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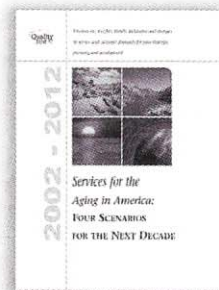
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CIRCLE 33 ON READER SERVICE CARD

The next day, the group visited Arlington National Cemetery, which turned out to be a challenge for the frail and wheelchair-bound seniors to access. Like the rest of the trip, though, all turned out well, and the veterans were able to see the Changing of the Guard at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Goodwin House, a CCRC in Alexandria, Virginia, had invited the group for lunch, and the facility's veterans welcomed those from Lutheran Homes. In the evening, Operation Enduring Thanks was capped off with a reception honoring the seniors.

Since the planning stages of the trip, a local PBS station, Delta College Quality Public Broadcasting in Bay City, Michigan, collaborated with Lutheran Homes to produce an hour-long documentary on Michigan's WWII veterans, including many associated with Lutheran Homes. *Vanishing Voices of World War II* premiered locally on November 27, 2005. "It is so powerful to hear these men and women telling their stories in such a humble way. And to see them as they are now telling these stories with flashback pictures showing the strength and energy and commitment of their youth is very powerful," Gehm says.

As a token of support, the PBS station, which shot approximately 50 hours of interviews, edited unused footage into DVDs of each of those veterans and gave them to the veterans and their families as gifts. The footage was also donated to the Library of Congress's Veterans History Project, which collects audio and video stories of WWII veterans. "The Library of Congress has had great difficulties getting the community to understand how important this is and getting folks to engage in it," Gehm notes. He urges communities and organizations to record veterans' stories before it's too late (see sidebar, "On the Web"). "Every nursing home in the country could partner with a local high school or junior high to engage those kids to come in and take video and audio of their veterans' stories," he suggests. "Just think about the collaboration that could add some vibrancy to the lives of these folks."

Lutheran Homes has no doubt about the success of Operation



Veteran Alice Bilan and CNA Desi Schaffenberg take a break from touring the memorial.



Pearl Harbor veteran Jack Healey (seated) met another veteran who was there on that fateful day, and the two exchanged memories.

Enduring Thanks and is eager to repeat the journey. "Our organization will do this again and again because we saw what value it added to the lives of our elders and their families and, frankly, our staff," Gehm says.

According to Gehm, the trip changed Lutheran Homes fundamentally. "We've had to rethink *everything*," he says. "We've spent the months since our trip rethinking our core values as an organization and our mission statement, and the whole idea of what we're really all about has been impacted by that four-day journey, because it gave us new insights into what folks with frailties can do."

One veteran, who was accompanied by a daughter on the trip, died just eight days after the group returned to Michigan. His family had questioned whether he should go, but he was adamant about going. He participated in and enjoyed the trip's activities, Gehm and Kaul note. He is one of four seniors who participated in Operation Enduring Thanks who have passed away since the trip. All four seniors' families have included the journey in their family member's obituary. ■

On the Web

More information on the National World War II Memorial and projects and sites mentioned in the article is available online:

- Arlington National Cemetery
www.arlingtoncemetery.org
- Delta College Quality Public Broadcasting
Vanishing Voices of World War II
www.delta.edu/broadcasting/vanishingvoices
- Library of Congress, American Folklife Center
Veterans History Project
www.loc.gov/vets
- National WWII Memorial
www.wwiimemorial.com
- Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of American History
The Price of Freedom: Americans at War
<http://americanhistory.si.edu/militaryhistory>

For more information, phone (989) 652-3470. To send your comments to the author and editors, e-mail peltier0206@nursinghomesmagazine.com.