

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

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 the Gold Star families.

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 won-

der 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. ... continued on page A8

Saranap Village goes to county Planning Commission

By John T. Miller

Contra Costa County Planning Commission Hearing, inviting public comment for the Saranap Village project proposed by Hall Equities Group (HEG), will be held June 28 at 7 p.m., at 651 Pine Street, Martinez.

Earlier this week, a hearing was held to review the final Environmental Impact Report. The zoning administrator with the County Department of Conservation and Development was expected to recommend approval. No public comments were taken at that time.

The project has gone through five years of presentations and overhauls; HEG has held eight open houses, along with many other public outreach programs, that resulted in with several rounds of design changes in response to public input.

David Dacus, president of the Saranap Community Association reported that their board unani-

mously recommended approval of the project, saying, "We believe it will be an asset to Saranap as a whole, providing needed services, upgraded buildings, calmer traffic, additional parking, and enhancements to a rundown area that has experienced few upgrades in the last 40 years."

The Walnut Creek Chamber of Commerce voted 13-to-1 to endorse the project, while the Contra Costa Association of Realtors sent word to the Board of Supervisors that they feel this project offers advantages in meeting community goals for housing.

An HEG spokesperson said, "We are cautiously optimistic that the Planning Commission will recommend approval of the reduced-height version of the project. We believe this development will be an asset to the community, transforming Boulevard Way into a vibrant neighborhood village."

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