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Family's first female soldier is keynote speaker at 8th Annual Wreaths Across America Ceremony



Some of the many people at the event on Saturday are prepare for the opening of the ceremony.

Story and Photos

By Jeff M. Hardison © Dec. 18, 2017 at 9:07 a.m.

BRONSON – A woman who was the first female soldier in her family served, too, as the first female speaker at an annual event in Bronson.

Bronson Town Councilwoman Katie Parks served as the keynote speaker Saturday afternoon (Dec. 16) during the Eighth Annual Sons of AmVets Squadron 88 Wreaths Across America ceremony.



Sons of AmVets Squadron 88 Commander Bill Conquest welcomed everyone to the event

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Sons of AmVets Squadron 88 Commander Bill Conquest welcomed everyone to the event. The commander said there is a saying that a person dies twice.

The first death is when their soul leaves their body. The second death is the last time a person says their name. With that in mind, he asked the Cub Scouts, Girl Scout, veterans and other volunteers to say the name of the person they were honoring with a wreath that day.



Cub Scouts from Pack 124 are assisted by Den Leader Sam Barnett in presenting the Colors.

Three members Cub Scout Pack 124 presented the Colors. Sam Barnett, the Den Leader for Den 6 of Bronson was among the adults joining the Scouts. Four other members of Pack 124 were

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at the ceremony with at least seven adults.

A Cub Scout led everyone in *The Pledge of Allegiance*.

This pack is comprised of boys from Archer, Bronson and Newberry.

The one Girl Scout from Tri-County Troop 1247 placed wreaths on headstones on veterans' graves in Rosemary Hill Cemetery. Girl Scout Mariah Diaz was accompanied by her brother Julio Diaz Jr., a Cub Scout, and their father United States Army Staff Sgt. Julio Diaz Sr.



AmVets Ladies Auxiliary Chaplain Arlene Lang gives the invocation.

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When Councilwoman Parks gave her speech, she thanked the hosts for inviting her and she said she was honored to be asked to give the keynote address.

The men in her family have served in all branches of the United States military, Parks said. Being the first female from her family to enlist, she found nothing but encouragement for her decision, she said.



Bronson Town Councilwoman Katie Parks shares with listeners some of the things soldiers give up to help keep all Americans free from tyranny.

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Soldiers make sacrifices to keep America a free country, she said. Soldiers often spend holidays separated from their families, and there are times where they are involved in active fighting in foreign countries.

They go without the joys of gifts, hot meals, in warm, comfortable houses where they are surrounded by loved ones, Parks said.

Holidays are spent by the enlisted or commissioned men and women with other soldiers that become their family members -- when they were strangers mere days, weeks or months before this time of year, she said.

Some of those strangers-turned-family members, she continued, never make it home to spend other holidays with their actual family and friends.

Some soldiers pay the ultimate sacrifice for the United States of America, giving their lives in the fight to maintain freedom, Councilwoman Parks said.

“That is why I think what you are doing today is an absolutely wonderful thing,” Parks said. “Remembering the veterans that are no longer with us, and honoring them and their families is a commendable thing – especially at this time of year.”

Parks said the work performed by American soldiers is an extremely laudable, admirable and praiseworthy service which is very deserving of respect and gratitude by the people of this country.

“The true hero, in my opinion, is the U.S. service member,” Parks said.



I- AmVets Post 88 Commander Dean Richards asks people to think about soldiers who cannot be with their loved ones during the holidays.

AmVets Post 88 Commander Dean Richards gave the closing remarks.

“When you’re with your family and friends at Christmas,” Richards said, “take a little time and think about our brothers and sisters that served and are no longer able to be with their families.”

Commander Richards said, too, to think about all of the soldiers overseas at Christmas as they perform their duty, as they have sacrificed their time and other resources during the holidays, as well as every other day while they are in service to the United States of America.

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It is thanks to the sacrifices of soldiers in the past and now, that civilians can be with their families in the comfort of a secure home, he said.

Those men and women wrote a check that they were willing to cash to help provide for the freedom and quality of life enjoyed by Americans today, Richards said. And so, as the volunteers place wreaths, he said, say the veteran's name, salute him or her and remember that they gave of themselves to help all Americans.

Commander Conquest, Councilwoman Parks and Commander Richards wished everyone a Merry Christmas as they concluded their statements.



In the two photos above, members of the VFW Post 5625 Honor Guard prepare and then fire shots to honor fallen veterans. In the distant background, Mike Grimes mans the bugle. The four riflemen (from left) in the center are Dennis 'Ace' McIntire, Kary Colson, Joe Elko and Roe Goldsmith. With his back to the camera (in the foreground) and directing the Honor Guard is Jake Wynn.

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Staff Sgt. Julio Diaz Sr. holds the next wreath for placement as he observes as his daughter Mariah Diaz has placed a wreath to honor a soldier at a gravesite in Rosemary Hill Cemetery in Bronson on Saturday.

The Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 5625 of Chiefland's Honor Guard composed of Kary Colson, Joe Elko, Roe Goldsmith, Mike Grimes, Dennis "Ace" McIntire and Jake Wynn fire three rounds from four shotguns and played Taps to conclude the service before the laying of the wreaths.

Levy County Commission Chairman John Meeks, first vice commander of the Sons of AmVets Squadron 88, is the man who initiated this program in Levy County eight years ago.

Chairman Meeks was absent on Saturday.

The mission of Wreaths Across America, according to its website, is to remember, to honor and to teach. The group wants to reach out in part by coordinating wreath-laying ceremonies on a specified Saturday in December at Arlington National Cemetery, as well

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as veterans' cemeteries and other locations in all 50 states and beyond.

The program from AmVets Squadron 88 for the event noted special thanks to the Honor Guard from VFW Post 5625 of Chiefland; Sons of AmVets Department of Florida; Sons of AmVets Squadron 88; AmVets Post 88; AmVets Ladies Auxiliary 88; Rockcoustic Systems Inc.; Robert and Mary Meeks; and Commissioner John Meeks.

“Very special thanks to all the brave men and women that served this great nation!” the program noted on the back, too.

To see the website for Wreaths Across America, click [HERE](#).