

SCRATCHPAD

American Legion exhibit shows legacy, vitality of organization

By **JONATHAN WILLIAMS**
COAST WEEKEND EDITOR

I thought I knew a few things about the American Legion as I did some brief research and prepared my questions for my interview with the executive director of the Columbia Pacific Heritage Museum in Ilwaco a few weeks ago.

As I drove over the Astoria Bridge to Washington I thought about the American Legion building in Astoria and the veterans I had seen in parades.

But when I arrived at the Museum for the opening of the exhibition, "Coming Home: World War I and the Centennial of the American Legion" I didn't realize just how much first-hand knowledge I would be receiving.

It was Armed Forces Day and members of Ilwaco's American Legion Post 48 were grilling hot dogs and hamburgers for visitors at the exhibit's opening reception.

I talked to 10th District Commander Dick Wallace, Legion commander Ron Robbins and Museum execu-

utive director Betsy Millard.

Both Wallace and Robbins talked about the importance of remembering veterans and the sacrifices they made.

Their passion to educate others about the history of the Legion was palpable.

They spoke of the Legion's history and how it was chartered by Congress after World War I to help assist veterans reintegrate into civilian life.

Ilwaco's Legion was named after Don R. Grable, the only man from the town

to die in World War I. The Legion had nearly 200 members after the end of World War II.

Millard spoke about how war was the first time many young men and women from Ilwaco left home. The soldiers wrote letters home and the newspapers would publish them.

The exhibit includes memorabilia from the Legion such as poems, newspaper articles, posters, clothing and stories that detail local World War I history.

What I did not know was the Legion's primary purpose: to help veterans and connect them to resources like Veterans Affairs clinics.

A veteran who goes to

the VA and was helped with their paperwork by a Legion officer will have their paperwork go to the top of the pile because the VA knows the Legion members are trained to help.

Wallace and Robbins spoke about helping veterans pay their light, water and rent bills and driving them to the VA in Longview.

They also talked about the community service work the Legion does, like going to Black Lake on Memorial Day and reading the names of fallen soldiers, retiring old flags on Flag Day, participate in parades and providing scholarships, gun safety classes and presenting community awards.


Most surprising and grat-

ifying was meeting World War II veteran James "Buck" Donnelly, 98, who fought in the Philippines.

To meet a living veteran who witnessed and fought in World War II was moving.

Wallace and Robbins talked about how much longer wars today last, the difficulty in getting new members and society's increasing awareness to veteran's living with PTSD.

Go see this exhibit. You'll be all the better for it.

The exhibit runs through July 6. CPHM is open 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday and is located at 115 Lake St. S.E., Ilwaco, Wash. Adults: \$5; Seniors (55+) \$4; Youth (13-17): \$2.50; 12 & Under are free. 

coast weekend

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Sharyn Hedbloom, a retired school counselor and local advocate and activist, waves the Pride flag in the Astoria Pride Parade.

PHOTO COURTESY MARGARET FRIMOTH

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