

**HONOR from page 1A**

graduate, just like Waggoner's grandma.

"I figured out that I had connections there that I didn't even know," Waggoner said.

The Honor Flight landed in D.C. on Friday and left on Sunday. Much of the tour revolved around visits to monuments and memorials, including the National Mall, World War II Museum, Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Lincoln Memorial, Korean War Veterans Memorial, Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial and the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial.

Waggoner joined other people, called guardians, who helped each of the attending veterans. Some of them were also from western Lane County.

"It was only 48 hours, but we got attached because we spent that much time together just over those two days," Waggoner said.

In particular, she connect-

ed with veterans that she got to help push in their wheelchairs or guide through some of the sites.

The trip gave Waggoner a unique view of veterans visiting important sites to them, their families and those who never returned from combat.

"There were three WWII veterans on our trip. They were sort of slouched down in their wheelchairs, but as soon as they saw the WWII memorial, instantly they were all stick straight in their seats," she said.

Some of the locations were especially moving, including the "Wall that Heals," the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall.

"Our Vietnam veterans didn't have the welcome home that they deserved to have. Right after we did a group picture of all the Vietnam vet-



Some of the memorials were especially poignant, including the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. (courtesy photos)



erans, some people just said, 'Welcome home.' There were instant tears for everybody. Because for them, it truly is a welcome home, and a time of healing and remembrance," Waggoner said.

The Honor Flight also visited Arlington National Cemetery, where the Honor Flight witnessed the changing of the guard at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

"That is always very powerful. We actually had a few people who were able to do a wreath laying ceremony, which is quite an honor for the people that get to go out there and interact with the guards at the tomb," Waggoner said.

A special feature of the Honor Flight is the Mail Call, where the veterans receive packets of mail. These written letters, some from family, some from strangers or students, thank the veterans for their service and honor them. Locally, Deb Bogart,

who owns The Mustard Seed in Florence, coordinated the creation of dozens of letters for the veterans.

"Seeing them open their mail, piece by piece and really reading each one, brought tears to not only their eyes, but people watching them," Waggoner said.

The trip also featured the Marine Corps Memorial, National Museum of the Army, Air Force Memorial, Disabled Veterans of America Memorial, Women In Military Service For America Memorial and the US Navy Memorial.

Living in D.C., Waggoner is able to visit the National Mall often, and she likes to go there for runs or just the day on the weekend.

"Growing up, you would always get asked if you could travel to one place, where would you go and why. I always said Washington, D.C.," she said.

She first visited the nation's

capital right before she began her senior year at Siu-

slaw. "What inspired me to come back in my senior year and plan the Veterans Assembly was seeing an Honor Flight group at the WWII Memorial," Waggoner said. "To see that many WWII veterans was incredible. I don't think I realized at the time how many we still had. That was one of the most prominent things that stood out from that experience before my senior year."

While the pandemic has prevented the assembly from happening in recent years, Waggoner's siblings, sophomores this year, are working on planning the assembly this year.

"I'm excited that they're going to continue that on, because it's super important when you have a community that has so many veterans like we do to be able to connect those experiences with the students," Waggoner said. "They're learning about these events in class, but veterans are still here. There's so much we can learn from them."

Even with her history degree, she said she learned so much on this trip.

"Any veterans out there, I would encourage you to talk to these veterans about their experience going. You know, I haven't served, so I can't speak from that perspective,

but I think it is really transformational for people. I didn't speak with a single veteran that regretted going. And I think it can be a really healing and really neat experience, especially if you get to go with a guardian, someone close with you in your life."

The South Willamette Valley Honor Flight works with veterans in Benton, Lane, Lincoln and Linn counties by taking them to Washington, D.C., to experience their memorials. These can be veterans who served between the beginning of WWII and the end of the Vietnam War, Dec. 7, 1941, to May 7, 1975. Currently, flight priority is given to WWII, Korean War and terminally ill veterans.

Veterans travel at no cost because of the generous support of individuals, businesses and civic organizations. Guardians who attend need to fundraise their trips.

"Everybody there that volunteered their time really went because they cared," Waggoner said. "It didn't matter who you were or where you were from, they wanted to make that experience the best they could for you."

"If anyone out there would like to volunteer as a guardian, they can always use more people. It's an experience I'm going to remember for the rest of my life. And if I have another opportunity to go, I will do it. No questions asked."

People can learn more about the Honor Flight at [www.svwthonorflight.org](http://www.svwthonorflight.org).

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