

County loses last Pearl Harbor attack survivor

Keeth was a witness to Japanese bombing

By Edward Stratton
Seaside Signal

Spurgeon D. Keeth, who was Clatsop County's last living survivor of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, died Thursday, Dec. 28. He was 92.

After spending most his life in Wapato, Washington, in the Yakima Valley, Keeth moved to Hammond in 2015 to be cared for by his daughter, Donna Barnett, and her husband, Bill. Keeth led a more private life and hadn't belonged to any veterans groups in Washington state, Barnett said.

"When he came here, things changed," she said. "He couldn't socialize a lot, but when people found out there was a Pearl Harbor survivor, they went nuts."

Keeth became a local celebrity on the North Coast and the county's last living survivor of the attack after the death of Seaside's Bill Thomas a year ago. Thomas, a sailor on the Navy's USS Medusa during the attack, helped lead



COLIN MURPHEY/SEASIDE SIGNAL

Spurgeon D. Keeth, left, Clatsop County's last living survivor of the attack on Pearl Harbor, died Thursday, Dec. 28.

the effort to dedicate Seaside's First Avenue Bridge the Pearl Harbor Memorial Bridge in 2000.

Keeth received free membership in American Legion Post 99 in Seaside and Clatsop Post 12 in Astoria and became a fixture at local parades and an annual wreath-laying ceremony on the memorial bridge.

Mike Phillips of Clatsop Post 12 said Keeth was one of about 50 World War II-era members of the post. Jay Blount, a spokesman with the National Park Service World War II Valor in the Pacific National Monument, told The Oregonian earlier this year there are likely fewer than 2,000 Pearl Harbor survivors left.

Keeth joined the Army at 16 and was stationed at Schofield Barracks in Honolulu. He was on kitchen duty at the time of the attack on Dec. 7, 1941.

"He went out to dump potato peelings, and he heard unexpected sounds of planes," Barnett said. "Then he looked up, and saw the rising sun on the planes."

Her father didn't talk about the attack much, she said, besides that he watched several of his friends die. Keeth served in the Pacific during World War II, including battles at Guadalcanal and in the Solomon Islands. In a 1944 interview with the the Yakima Herald, Keeth described surviving nearby shell explosions, a 19-day siege and being shot at and missed from 3 yards away.

"He could have touched me with his rifle," Keeth told the newspaper of his run-in with the Japanese soldier. "I don't know how he happened to miss."

After the war, Keeth married Ruby, and the couple had four children and nine grandchildren. Most of the family still resides in Yakima Valley, Barnett said. Keeth attended Perry Trade School and learned to be a mechanic who specialized in bodies and fenders.

"Dad was so handy," Barnett said, describing her father taking apart a surplus house at Fort Vancouver, Washington, and reassembling it as the family home in Wapato. "He self-taught himself to do everything."

Keeth strung together jobs picking fruit, baking and working at local automotive

shops before spending 30 years as the shop foreman servicing vehicles on the federal Wapato Irrigation Project in the Yakima Valley. After retiring, Keeth volunteered at local parks and drove buses part time for the school district and fruit farmers.

Ruby Keeth cared for her husband until falling and breaking her hip, after which he moved to Hammond. Keeth was quickly embraced by local veterans and other volunteer organizations, who outfitted Barnett's house with ramps for Keeth's wheelchair and a specialized shower. He became especially popular at Camp Rilea Armed Forces Training Center, where he once visited for a doctor's appointment and ended up having lunch with an entire troop.

"There were so many people wanting to meet him," Barnett said. "Some grown men, my age, would walk away crying. He would remind them of someone in their family. They'd be so touched by meeting dad."

"At the end, they all said, 'Thank you Mr. Keeth for joining us today.' Camp Rilea was just amazing to dad."

A memorial for Keeth will be held Saturday at Camp Rilea.

American Legion: Helping those who help

'We're blessed to be able to give'

By Brenna Visser
Seaside Signal

When community members started trickling slowly in for Christmas dinner at the Seaside American Legion Post 99, they passed a table filled with knitted hats and fleece gloves.

"How much?" one person asked. "Are these for me?" another inquired.

Behind the table fielding the questions was Marilyn Falker, a longtime member of the American Legion Auxiliary service group. To fight dropping temperatures, fellow volunteers knitted a variety of hats for free. Earlier Saturday morning, Dec. 23, she swung by a thrift store and bought the pile of gloves to accompany them.

"Take whatever makes you smile," she said.

Each year, the Legion hosts a Christmas dinner, where volunteers serve hot plates of turkey and potatoes, all free and open to anyone who walks through the doors.

While the primary focus of the Legion is to serve veterans, on days like this their goal is to help whoever needs it, events coordinator Bud



BRENNA VISSER/SEASIDE SIGNAL

American Legion Auxiliary member Marilyn Falker helps guests at the Christmas dinner choose a knitted hat.

'When you help, you just stop thinking about the things you're going through, because 99 percent of the time, you know what? They're not that bad.'

Marilyn Falker

Thompson said.

It's a goal the Legion keeps in mind throughout the year, even after the holiday lights are taken down and Christmas music recedes from the radio airwaves. Falker is a volunteer who has made the goal a lifestyle.

When she's not handing out hats and gloves, she's judiciously restocking and checking the charity box

the Legion maintains for the homeless with items like toothpaste, deodorant and coupons. About four times a year, she crochets lap robes for veterans.

The auxiliary's goal is to work on overcoming the hurdle of how to let those in need know that these resources are available to them, she said.

"It's about choice, empowering people to take what

they need," Falker said. "But we have a hard time knowing how many veterans are around who need this help."

Falker's passion for the Legion started about 20 years ago after her husband, an Army veteran, died suddenly. She went all over town to different churches and groups, looking for a sense of community.

With her husband's service as a connection, she found her home at the Legion.

"This is the place that said 'you can give what you have,'" Falker said. "Reaching out to other people whose story we don't know is so important. We're blessed to be able to give, whether it's a smile or some yarn."

Her volunteer work has continued to be an outlet. Between the loss of her husband and acting as a full-time caretaker for her two disabled sons, the work she does is as much a benefit to herself as it is to the community it serves, she said.

"This is my escape," she said, running over to open a door for an outgoing dinner guest.

"When you help, you just stop thinking about the things you're going through, because 99 percent of the time, you know what? They're not that bad."

Sharing the newcomer experience

Woman seeks to start North Coast Newcomer Group

By Brenna Visser
Seaside Signal

There's a lot about Gearhart Ellie Ludy has grown to love. The scenery is breathtaking and the people are kind, she said.

Having an elk herd wander through town is another bonus she didn't expect when she moved to the coast about a year ago.

"It just is unbelievable," Ludy laughed. "I knew there would be elk, but I didn't know they would come into your yard!"

She contemplated moving to Portland after her children and grandchildren moved to Hillsboro, but decided to semi-retire and transition into a "tranquil" life by the beach. She chose Gearhart for its quaint aesthetic and quiet vibe, she said.

"I grew up on the beach on a little island off southern California and I just loved this area," she said. "I originally looked in the Portland area and I started to wonder why I was changing from one highly dense community for another."

The ability to meet new



Ellie Ludy

friends is one aspect of North Coast living she has found to be more difficult. A sales executive at Ticor Title in Seaside, Ludy meets numerous clients in the real estate industry, but meeting people outside of work is proving to more of a challenge.

"That's why I want to start the North Coast Newcomers group," Ludy said. "I think like any small community, it's very hard to break into relationships and groups of people who have

'It's very hard to break into relationships and groups...when someone new moves in they are very nice, but you don't get invited to anything. And I understand that, but I also want to change it.'

Ellie Ludy

been friends for maybe 20 or 30 years. You have these cemented groups. And when someone new moves in they are very nice, but you don't get invited to anything. And I understand that, but I also want to change it."

Ludy got the idea after living and working in Napa Valley, California for the past five years. When she first moved to Sonoma, there was a variety of activity clubs newcomers could join to meet others. The North Coast

Newcomers group would focus on connecting mainly retirees, she said, who she envisions would participate in monthly lunches or group activities outdoors.

She hopes to get the word out starting in January through "newcomer packets" she hands out at Ticor Title for new homeowners.

"I love to bike ride and to cook and to golf, but I want to find other women who like to do that, too," she said. "I've heard the same problem from other new people. If I put this out there, I think they will come."

Overall, Ludy still celebrates her decision to commit to beach life. The rain can be tiresome, she said, but also "is also what makes this place so beautiful." Every so often she yearns for the restaurants and wineries that make the Napa Valley famous in the culinary world.

But with ocean views a few blocks away and the elk outside her white picket fence, she's reminded of the tranquility that drew her here.

"It's a perfect fit for me," Ludy said.

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