

FINGER LAKES TIMES

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TUESDAY SEPTEMBER 2, 2008 Last modified: Tuesday, September 2, 2008 11:07 AM CDT

A flag that keeps on flying

By John Addyman/Finger Lakes Times

WOLCOTT — The fabric that Joanne and Steve Galvin wove continues to spin.

"It's an overwhelming feeling when you see something you created touch the hearts of so many," Joanne Galvin said, sitting in the neatly organized office at her Wolcott home. It's from right there that she's been carrying on a labor of love that started soon after 9/11, while her husband, Steve, was driving home from work.

The couple wanted, needed, to do something for the victims of the 2001 terrorist attacks.

"We wanted to send something to try to help," Joanne said. "But we thought, 'Whatever we send as two middle-class citizens isn't going to make a dent.'"

While stopped at a traffic signal, Steve stared at a flagpole where an MIA flag was flying — and it came to him. He told Joanne they could design a flag, "an everlasting remembrance."

"He drew it out on a piece of paper," Joanne said. "We did a Google search to make sure nothing closely resembled his design."

Bobbi Chilson volunteered to hand-sew the first working version, and the Galvins started looking at flag companies. "But patriotism was running so high then, all the flag companies were booked solid and wouldn't talk to us."

Working through the Veterans' Outreach Center and its Stars and Stripes flag store, the Galvins found Valley Forge Flag Co. in Wyomissing, Pa., and its plant in South Carolina.

Once the flag was in production, the Galvins started getting the word out.

But, as they did, a personal tragedy struck. Steve died of cancer in 2005, having asked Joanne to continue what they'd started.

"He was so overwhelmed by this, by the number of people who lost family members in 9/11 who would call us," Galvin said. "We would be hours on the phone at night, filling orders and just listening to their stories. I don't regret a minute of it."

She has since been to Shanksville, Pa., where United Flight 93 went down after its passengers fought with the hijackers, preventing the plane from hitting downtown Washington, D.C. Over the years, she's also participated in numerous flag dedications, and she was just recently invited to 9/11 ceremonies and the dedication of the monument at the Pentagon, where another plane struck.

To date, about 2,000 of their flags have been sold, with donations going to relief funds, and \$15,000 sent to the American Legion scholarship fund, to help children of members of the armed services.

And the image on the flag has spawned other commemorative items — small stickers made at Electromark in Wolcott, lapel pins made at Bastian in Geneva, patches made at Patchworks Co. in New Jersey, and Italian charms made by Caranois Jewelry in Illinois.

"It doesn't sound like we've done a tremendous amount, but everything has been done from the home and the only advertising we've done is through our Web site. I continue to make the flag known however I can, but it's been hard to get all this done since my husband's death, and it's been hard to be in all the different places you'd like to be at that time (9/11) of year."

Locally, flags are sold in Fairport at Fred's Flags, and at the Stars and Stripes store in Rochester.

Those flags have flown at the New York State Fair, at many American Legion posts, fire departments, emergency services, and all kinds of parades and ceremonies.

Galvin said a man organizing a 10-mile race in Virginia wants to raise money for 9/11 and cancer victims, and he ordered a flag for the color guard to carry at the event.

Galvin said she continues to donate flags to families of 9/11 who make a request, and she is still busy answering e-mails from the thousands of people who have contacted her. She said fire companies and emergency services will buy the flag to raffle off in their fund-raisers. And she has donated flags for fundraisers for service members wounded in Iraq or any other worthy cause.

"I'll do anything I can," she said. "And I will continue on for as long as I can. Steve and I made so many friends ... we realized how fortunate we are."

For more information, go to www.911remembranceflag.com or contact Joanne Galvin at 594-9274 or 911nrf@verizon.net