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NewsRoom

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Grand Ledge H.S. Honors Fallen Heroes

By [KEVIN LAVERY](#) (@PEOPLE/KEVIN-LAVERY)

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04:33

When the Grand Ledge Comets take the field against Lansing Sexton tonight, the players will be wearing special uniforms.

The team has been studying the lives of some 60 Michigan soldiers killed in combat. Each member's football jersey will bear a soldier's name in tribute. At the end of the game, those nameplates will be given to each of the veterans' families.

WKAR's Kevin Lavery sat down with Matt Bird, Grand Ledge High School head football coach, and special education teacher Beth Boyd. Now in its third year, the school's "Fallen Heroes" project began as a sort of civics lesson. But Coach Bird says the event has grown to mean something greater, both for the students and the community.



<http://media.publicbroadcasting.net/p/wkar/files/2012/09/07/20120907Jersey%201.JPG>

Credit Kevin Lavery / WKAR

Special education teacher Beth Boyd and football coach and social studies teacher Matt Bird co-coordinate the "Fallen Heroes" tribute at Grand Ledge High School.

MATT BIRD: We were going to get a list of about 60 names of soldiers who had died in Afghanistan or Iraq from the state of Michigan who had served this country. And so, we were able to get a hold of some of the families, and they have really taken this and run with it. And that's really important to get the seal of approval for them. But it was an idea that was just...how could we do justice to this and then how could we also bring these kids...their lives don't change when we're at war. They come and go and are able to operate with lots of freedoms and so we wanted to do something to acknowledge those that have come before us.

BETH BOYD: I just loved the idea, because anytime we can take and bring that sense of community: civics, responsibility...and we can teach the importance of that, and it's bigger than that football field. My son was a football player, and after they (his class) graduated, they had that sense of community and they're very close still. So, we already had that concept going with the team, and in fact, Matt (Bird) was my son's coach. And we wanted to take that bigger.

KEVIN LAVERY: How do the students get involved in researching these fallen troops, and what does it really mean when they reach the point we are at now where there's this home game where they get to fulfill that research by honoring their memory by wearing a jersey with their name on it?

BIRD: As simple as it is, they Google their names, and hear the stories. And a lot of these families have got memorial (web) sites, where friends and soldiers that they served with will get on and tell stories. And so these kids do the research, and then one

by one each player will stand up and tell the story of the soldier that he's representing. And it's a pretty moving time. It puts a definite substance to the name; it's not just a name anymore.

Then, when these families come in on Friday night after the game, we present them with that nameplate. The moms always want to know, OK, tell me about my son. And the fact that our boys are able to then say, well, we know that he enjoyed hunting with his father and we know that he did this and he went to school here...that's important to them. And that's where you just sit back and watch amazed. I don't think adults could handle it as well as these kids do. These kids do a tremendous job with it.

LAVERY: Beth, what was the mood like three years ago? You had your home game, they wore the jerseys, and afterwards when they went to meet with the families and give them the jerseys...what was that mood like when it was such a new idea?

BOYD: The best thing that happened that night was meeting the families and suddenly I knew our purpose was right. These families are amazing and it's just a great thing. I do this on my own free time; I love it. It's my thing. It fills me up.

LAVERY: Matt, what do your players tell you about what they learn and how they grow from doing this?

BIRD: They are just amazed that night when things are done; the guys are kind of at a loss for words. I'll never forget the player who's a pretty non-emotional kid; he doesn't show a lot of emotion. He was awarded the dog tags of his soldier. The parents wanted him to have them. And I said, "well, what did you do when you got them?" He said, "I went home and cried. I cried like a baby. I didn't know what to do." He wore those dog tags that whole season, and I think he still wears the dog tags.

You know, the thing is they'll never forget. They'll never forget five years, 10 years, 30 years from now, they'll always remember that name that they represented, and that's what's important.

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