

NAPER SETTLEMENT

Garden beds dedicated to local 'fallen heroes'

Service members and first responders among those honored



A raised garden bed sits outside the Daniels House on Naper Settlement's museum campus as part of a living memorial created by Naperville nonprofit OLI Gardens in honor of local military members who died in active service and first responders killed in the line of duty. Tess Kenny/Naperville Sun

BY TESS KENNY NAPERVILLE SUN

Sixteen years ago, Gunnar Hotchkin lived in Naperville with his wife and their three children. He was a home builder, working to support his young family. But then the 2008 recession hit, and Gunnar was left without a job.

Needing employment — and finding it difficult to find any — he went into the Army.

Gunnar died the year after he joined, in June 2010.

But he lives on in Naperville. And he's still giving himself to the community.

In a shaded slice of Naper Settlement's museum campus, Army Pfc. Gunnar Hotchkin and 11 other names are part of OLI Gold Star Gardens, a living memorial of raised garden beds dedicated to local "fallen heroes." Each pays tribute to a military member who died in active service or a first responder killed in the line of duty. Honorees are mostly from Naperville, or otherwise from around DuPage County.

An ongoing effort over the past several years, OLI Gold Star beds are planted anew each spring. This year, the memorials will be commemorated with a dedication ceremony on May 8 during which Naperville's Millennium Carillon will sound its chorus of bells 12 times, one for each person remembered.

To Gunnar's mom, the display is "so much more than just a name on a wall."

"There's a lot of memorials," Christine Hotchkin said. "But this (is living). ... That is just so much more meaningful."

The beds at Naper Settlement are organized by OLI Gardens, a Naperville-based nonprofit founded in 2017 with a mission to create sustainable solutions to eliminating food insecurity. The group started planting memorial garden beds as part of that mission a few years ago.

At first, the venture was nothing more than a simple kindness to a friend. It started with Hotchkin and her son. Christine Hotchkin connected with OLI Gardens through its president and co-founder, Fred Greenwood. They knew each other through Greenwood's wife, Dianne McGuire, former chairwoman of the Naperville Township Democratic Organization.

It was 2021 and Memorial Day was approaching when McGuire encouraged Greenwood to "do something for (Christine) and her son," Greenwood said in an interview.

He decided OLI Gardens could build her a garden bed in remembrance of Gunnar. They delivered the bed to the Hotchkin family with a memorial service before it went to stay at Hotchkin's house in Woodridge.

"It was amazing to be given that gift," Hotchkin said.

Her son died while on deployment in Afghanistan, she said. Gunnar, who joined the Army as an engineer, was part of a unit that found improvised explosive devices, or I.E.D.s, on roads and cleared them so troops and other people could pass safely, Hotchkin said

Her son's unit was sent to clear a road in Kunduz, Afghanistan, when the armored vehicle he was riding in hit a roadside bomb and flipped. Gunnar and another soldier were killed. Both were awarded Bronze Star medals posthumously.

Gunnar's memorial garden bed remained in Hotchkin's backyard until she moved last year. Hotchkin said that when the weather was nice, she'd sit out in her yard every morning. Seeing and spending time with her son's living memorial "was just wonderful," she said.

Hotchkin would plant all kinds of vegetables — squash, tomatoes, peppers — in the bed's soil. And when produce was ready to pick, she'd bring her harvest to her local People's Resource Center. Making those donations in her son's name "meant a lot" to her, she said.

Since Hotchkin moved, Gunnar's memorial has been renewed at Naper Settlement as part of OLI's larger fallen hero community garden. Christine Hotchkin is now also the chairman of OLI's Board of Directors.

"Fred (Greenwood) is really good at getting people involved," she said with a laugh.

Greenwood knew that, after the garden bed for Hotchkin, he wanted to dedicate more to others like Gunnar.

He recalled Hotchkin telling him that "out of all the things that had been done for (her) son, this was by far the best."

"I was kind of shocked," he said. "We just thought it was a good thing to do. We had no idea it meant that much to her."

By word of mouth, he connected with other Gold Star families — the immediate kin of someone who died in active-duty military service — and more dedications followed. To a Naperville Central High School graduate who died during a firefight in Baghdad in 2004. To a Naperville Central graduate

who served three deployments in Afghanistan but ultimately took his own life as a result of PTSD. To another Naperville Central grad who was killed in the 9/11 attack on the Pentagon.

And this year, for the first time, OLI Gardens is expanding its garden bed memorials to include Naperville police and firefighters lost in the of duty.

Greenwood says fashioning these memorials “is such a rewarding thing.”

“I can’t think of anything I’d rather do,” he said.

Beyond the dedication itself, Greenwood added that whatever food their fallen hero garden beds produce, which can range from cauliflower to kale, goes to local food pantries “in honor of an individual who paid the ultimate sacrifice,” he said.

“We say it’s beyond the sacrifice,” he said, “because they not only gave their lives but now are continuing to support people that are food insecure, even though they aren’t here.”

Greenwood is hoping memorials can soon stretch past Naper Settlement. Those aspirations are in the works.

Already at locations in Aurora and Joliet, OLI Gardens has erected raised garden beds that Greenwood says will eventually stand in tribute to someone.

“Everything will be for a fallen hero in the community,” he said. It just takes time to identify and formally dedicate those honorees, he said.

OLI Gardens even has ambitions beyond the western suburbs.

Greenwood says the nonprofit is “really close” to bringing the venture to other states, noting that they’ve received interest from people from outside of Illinois wanting to see similar memorials in their communities.

“We can go almost any place people ask us to go,” Greenwood said.

The OLI Gold Star Gardens dedication event at Naper Settlement will begin at 5 p.m. Wednesday at the Mary & Richard Benck Agriculture Center. Both Greenwood and Hotchkin will be speaking.

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