

Memorial planned for students who died in service

BY ANNEMARIE MANNION
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Officials in Downers Grove Community High School District 99 plan to honor and remember students who died serving the country with peace gardens at each of the high schools.

The schools have no permanent memorials honoring those who have paid the ultimate price, said Chris Esposito, chairman of the social services department at Downers Grove South, along with Jenne Dehmlow, who chairs the social studies department at Downers Grove North.

"There currently is nothing permanent in our schools to honor their sacrifice, teach our students about the painful consequences of war, or remind students, staff and the community of the need to work for peace," Esposito said.

Seventy former stu-

dents from the district died serving in the U.S. military from World War I to wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Esposito and Dehmlow are spearheading the proposal to build the memorial peace gardens at each of the high schools.

The garden at Downers Grove North would be in the Forest Street North Circle. The one at Downers Grove South would be at the West Events Entrance. A statue of a Mustang, which is the school's mascot, would remain in the vicinity of the garden and would look majestic and part of the plan, Dehmlow said.

The gardens would each have "peace poles" inscribed with the phrase "May Peace Prevail on Earth" in multiple languages. They also would have stones listing the names of those who've lost their lives in war, benches, plants, trees and other

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landscaping.

The combined cost of the gardens would be \$75,000. Esposito and Dehmlow already expect to receive a \$25,000 donation for labor and plants, and would raise the other \$50,000 through additional donations.

Dehmlow said there are other reasons the schools should have peace gardens. She said young people's understanding of the real consequences of war has been dulled by violent video games and military conflicts that seem unreal because they are in far-off lands.

"Educators continually witness students who are desensitized to the realities of war," she said.

Esposito said that gardens represent life, death,

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— Michael Davenport, school board member

renewal and would inspire questions about why people serve in the military, why they kill each other, and what people can do to work toward peace.

School board member Michael Davenport said he didn't think it would be too hard to raise the money.

"I do believe this is something people will rally around, and that's long overdue," he said.

The village of Downers Grove would need to approve the plans for the garden at Downers Grove North because it would be

on village-owned land. Esposito and Dehmlow worked with Grant & Power Landscaping of West Chicago, which developed concepts for the gardens on a pro bono basis. The project would not require any district money, Dehmlow said.

Esposito noted that the schools honor other former students for their achievements in athletics, academics and the arts with trophies, plaques and other awards displayed in the schools' hallways.

"There is no recognition for District 99 graduates who gave the most," Esposito said.

The goal is to install the gardens and celebrate with a ribbon-cutting ceremony on Memorial Day 2016.

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