

Secretary Gale submitted this article to Nebraska newspapers for their consideration.

Use Veterans Day to send a message to young people

By John Gale

My wife and I recently spent a day at Peru State College for homecoming events. It was a beautiful day, so we drove around the town and ended up at the Mt. Vernon Cemetery. We walked among the graves of veterans, including young soldiers who died in the Civil War.

It moved us deeply to be reminded of these veterans who saved our Union at a time when Nebraska was just a territory. We talked about the veterans in our families and other Nebraska families, whose service in various conflicts was so vital to the defense of the freedom and independence of Americans, as well as people around the world.

As secretary of state, I work hard to promote good citizenship in our young people. We want them to be lifelong voters, hold office, be good neighbors, do volunteer service in their communities and live within the laws of the land.

I am especially concerned about the need for civics education. In partnership with schools across Nebraska, my office is involved in a number of successful civics-related programs: Nebraska statehood birthday parties, Nebraska Student Vote, Nebraska Capitol Forum on America's Future, Youth Election Service, and high school and college voter registration efforts.

One powerful message on civics comes from the voice of veterans. In 2008, I formed a committee to promote a program known as Honor a Veteran, which encourages Nebraska middle schools to take time each year to honor veterans in their communities. Gov. Dave Heineman, a veteran, is honorary chairman of the committee.

The program is modeled after an event at Barr Middle School in Grand Island that is held in connection with Veterans Day.

Students are asked to provide the names of relatives or friends who have served in the military (living or deceased) or who are currently serving in the military. Nominees are invited to attend the school event where the names of nominated servicemen and women are read as part of the special ceremony.

The events typically include such elements as an honor guard presenting the colors, the singing of the national anthem, the school band playing patriotic music, a video message about our veterans, a keynote speaker and a student presentation about the history of Veterans Day, formerly known as Armistice Day.

Through my office's Web site, we provide all of the materials necessary for any middle school to develop such an event. We provide a speakers bureau for the program, and the Nebraska National Guard is active in recruiting speakers from its own ranks.

We ask middle schools to let us know if they have a veterans recognition event, and we honor them with a certificate of appreciation.

Having attended a number of these middle school events around the state, I am extremely impressed with the message that our students learn from these events.

It is a moving sight to see our young people hearing the personal stories of our veterans and thanking them for their service. There is no message more powerful to the veterans than a heartfelt thank-you, and there is no stronger lesson for the students than to realize that the veterans preserved their freedom and independence to enjoy a "government of the people, by the people, and for the people."

Honor our veterans on Veterans Day, Nov. 11, and remember to say, "Thank you."

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