

Published April 18th, 2018

Lafayette's native son among those honored in new memorial

By Pippa Fisher



Senior Airman Jonathan Vega Yelner who was killed in action in Afghanistan 10 years ago. Photo provided

troops from this country.

"Today's generation of service men and women, unlike mine who were drafted, all volunteer," says Gilson. "They chose to go and it's important to recognize them."

Gilson also points out the importance of recognizing the sacrifice of Gold Star families - those mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, husbands and wives who have lost loved ones.

Yolander (Jolie) Vega says she would love it if Lafayette residents would fly an American flag on April 29 on their front yards to honor and recognize their city's fallen hero on the anniversary of her son's death.

The young man went to school at St. Perpetua's and De La Salle High School, belonged to Boy Scout Troop 243 and worked at Safeway and the Hungry Hunter in his hometown.

Vega explains, "Jonathan volunteered to serve a 365-day deployment to Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan, in support of Operation Enduring Freedom as a driver for the Kapisa and Parwan Provincial Reconstruction Team for the U.S. Air Force. He was part of the first Civil Affairs Team to establish a permanent presence at Fire Base Kutschbach (FBK), Tag Ab district, Kapisa Province."

On April 29, 2008, Vega says that her son was driving his team on a mission to conduct battle damage assessment outside of the village of Bedreau.

"As the convoy began to travel back to FBK, a rocket-propelled grenade was fired at the lead vehicle in the convoy. Jonathan aggressively and accurately maneuvered his vehicle to allow the gunner to return fire. After suppressing the enemy fire, Jonathan's vehicle was struck by an improvised explosive device, killing him instantly," says Vega.

He posthumously received the Bronze Star and Purple Heart.

Funds for the new \$50,000 memorial have been raised by donations including an anonymous gift of \$25,000, with the rest of the cost being covered by a fund from the Lafayette War Veterans.

Gilson says the dedication will start with a ceremony inside and then head outside for the unveiling of the monument. Many of the elected officials of Contra Costa County will be in attendance. Vega Yelner's Boy Scout Troop 243 will participate in the ceremony that Gilson says will be inspiring.

"I encourage everyone to attend," urges Gilson.

Twenty-two fallen service men and women from Contra Costa County who lost their lives in the line of duty since 9/11 will be honored and permanently remembered on a new memorial to be installed at the front of the Lafayette Veterans Memorial Center. It will be the only monument in California to recognize the entire group.

The dedication is set for April 29, the 10th anniversary of Lafayette born and raised Senior Airman Jonathan Vega Yelner's death in action in Afghanistan during Operation Enduring Freedom.

Constructed of three large slabs of granite weighing 7 tons and standing 6 and a half feet tall, the monument has been designed to fit the space in the circle at the entrance. It will have space for additional names as needed.

Lafayette resident Michael Gilson, himself a fifth-generation veteran who served in the U.S. Air Force overseas between 1966-70, hopes it will be a reminder of those being honored to the thousands of people who drive by or visit the building each year.

Gilson says it will be a perpetual memorial - a continuing acknowledgement of the sacrifices of the volunteer

The dedication is scheduled for 2 p.m. April 29 at the Lafayette Veterans Memorial Center.

Reach the reporter at: pippa@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA