

A football field flag-raising has unexpected touch

By **MARTHA SOROHAN**

It was a hometown flag-raising like no other – and impromptu at that.

When Chagrin Falls VFW Post Commander Todd Lyle arrived at the Chagrin Falls High School football home opener on Aug. 25, he expected the usual handful of VFW members to be waiting at the flagpole.

They have served as color guard since 2011 for the flag-raising that precedes every high school home football game.

But for some reason – perhaps fall-out from the previous night’s storms – no one else was there but Bill O’Neill, Senior Vice Commander of the local VFW chapter.

“We typically send a text, but it broke down,” Mr. Lyle said.

“We always arrive around 6:30 and the flag is raised around 6:50 p.m., after the alma mater and national anthem are sung,” he continued. “I had arrived at the game with my son, Dane, and I said, ‘How are we going to do this?’”

Looking around at the young people arriving for the game, Mr. Lyle quickly came up with another idea.

“We began grabbing the kids who were standing around,” he said of a group of eighth-grade girls and Dane’s sixth-grade classmates. “And they were all, ‘boom!’ They listened. We had to do it now.”

Back in the day, getting VFW veterans to serve as color guard for the flag-raising ceremony at home football games was not difficult, especially since the VFW had been the driving force behind the new flagpole’s installation at the high school field.

Pine trees had grown up and completely hidden the original flagpole, and the situation was unchanged for years.

In 2011, according to Mr. Lyle, the late Chagrin Falls Alumni Director Tom Mattem, Chagrin Falls coach Glenn Wyville, and Chagrin Falls Historical Society director John Bourrisseau spearheaded a fund drive with the Chagrin Falls VFW and coordinated with Bob

Hunt to install a replacement.

“We raised the money in about an hour, from the businesses in town,” Mr. Lyle said. “I went to them and said, ‘Hey, here’s what we got,’ and I got seven people to each write \$1,000 checks. My dad and I put some money in, too.”

Once the flagpole was installed next to the scoreboard, Mr. Mattem issued another challenge.

He asked the VFW to provide a color guard for each home game’s flag-raising.

A dozen years later, this is becoming more and more difficult.

“Like many organizations, we are running out of people. We’re aging out,” Mr. Lyle said. “Our organization is lacking veterans.”

Thus that Friday night predicament may have been a blessing in disguise.

The kids who participated in the impromptu color guard – spreading out and raising the flag above the ground as Mr. O’Neill gave instructions -- were described by Mr. Lyle as “awestruck.”

“They did exactly what we wanted, and afterward, they were quiet. They were in awe. They said ‘thank you,’” he said.

Even as the color guard was being lined up, kids who normally sit on the wall were watching.

“Some of them were asking my son, ‘Can we come?’ and they slipped under the rope,” Mr. Lyle said. “The girls drew a lot of attention. We didn’t have time to make a big production of it. But it’s an honor to raise the flag. This is the first time we had kids, and it was organic.”

Although Mr. Lyle wants veterans to continue to participate in this ceremony – even if only once a season – he has concluded that serving as pre-game color guard would be a good service project for youth clubs and organizations, especially with the support of the Chagrin Falls schools administration.

“To honor our country,” Mr. Lyle said, “It’s ‘Americana’ when you can stand there on a fall evening and take in the entire scope.”



Led by Chagrin Falls Intermediate School sixth-grader Dane Lyle, the last-minute color guard for the flag-raising Aug. 25 at Chagrin Falls High School football game included (from left): Daria Kuzmenko, Olivia Horvath, Ivy Levey, Ava Horvath, Katie Sirianni, Gabrielle Byrne, Dominic Giordano, and Brody Schron.

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