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Bring a Hero Home Rally Article

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Bring a Hero Home rally draws family, friends of pilot who died in Vietnam

BY NICOLE KLAUSS
ELLENSBURG DAILY RECORD

The tables at Kelleher Motor Co. were full on Saturday night, but one table was left empty.

The vacant spot was for San D. Francisco, a pilot who went missing during the Vietnam War. The POW/MIA table contained symbolic settings to show the difficulties of those who are missing in action or were prisoners of war.

The city of Ellensburg and Kittitas County declared Saturday San D. Francisco Day, a day remembering and honoring the Central Washington University graduate, who died in military service in 1968. Francisco was a Central football player, wrestler, student and Air Force ROTC graduate.

"It's emotional," said Joetta Rupert, a close friend of San's sister, Terri Francisco, and the treasurer of the San D. Francisco Awareness Campaign. "If you're from Tri-Cities, you remember when San went missing. ... Terri has spent her whole adult life trying to keep San alive."

Terri Francisco was 16 when her brother's plane was shot down in 1962.

"She's 62," Rupert said. "If you know Terri, you know about her brother. She wants everyone to remember. He was a hero."

Terri spoke at the event briefly and encouraged people to share their stories of San.

"Keep him alive for all of us," she said.

Bringing San home

The Bring a Hero Home rally and fundraiser was held Saturday to raise money to help bring Francisco's remains home from Vietnam.

Francisco, an Air Force first lieutenant assigned to the elite 555th Fighter Squadron in Thailand, volunteered to take a mission even though he had completed the 100 missions he was required. He was due to return on Dec. 1, 1968, to his wife, Kay, and 4-year-old son, Tod.

Francisco was shot down along the Ho Chi Minh Trail in North Vietnam on Nov. 25, 1968, on that mission. He ejected from his Phantom F-4D fighter jet, but his parachute didn't deploy fully, and witnesses say he broke both of his legs when he landed.

As Francisco was taken into captivity by enemy forces, a mortar from an American search and rescue mission hit and killed him.

A Vietnamese witness reportedly knows where Francisco's remains are located, but is aging so there is a need to take action quickly.

Francisco's sister isn't sure if the

Department of Defense will be bringing his remains home or if a private group will, which is why the fundraiser was needed.

Promoting patriotism

Janine Stange sang the anthem to kick off the event.

The New York native came to be known as the "National Anthem Girl" when she made history earlier this year by completing her goal of singing "The Star-Spangled Banner" in all 50 states before the 200th anniversary (Sept. 14, 2014) of Francis Scott Key writing the lyrics. Though her quest is complete, she still hopes to continue singing the song, which she learned to sing in high school.

"I just really want to use this platform of having made history — singing in all 50 states — to continue to promote patriotism and honor for those who embody the meaning of the song," Stange said. "As I traveled through all 50 states, I realized I'm definitely not done. I think there's so much that can be done. There's so much more to inspire others to look for needs in their local community."

Stange said Saturday's event was her first time singing at a POW/MIA event, though she has been at memorial events.

"The focus is the same — to give honor to those who keep us free to come to an event, to pursue our dreams," she said.

Honoring Francisco

The event was attended by local veterans, as well as some of Francisco's family and classmates.

Ron Prynn traveled to Ellensburg from the west side to watch Central's homecoming game and honor Francisco.

"I knew him on the football field," he said. "I was a freshman. He was a senior. I just knew him out there practicing."

Kittitas Valley Fire and Rescue raised a flag on its ladder, across the street from Kelleher Motor Co. Some of Central's ROTC students presented the colors.

The event had special meaning for Central senior ROTC student Loren Danielson who has a tie to Francisco. Danielson, who belongs to the Arnold Air Society community service organization, wears a silver POW/MIA bracelet with Francisco's name. Francisco belonged to Arnold Air Society when he attended Central.

"Every two years it gets passed down from a senior to a sophomore," he said. "I wear it every day."

Though he wasn't sure when the tradition started, Danielson said being chosen to wear the bracelet and carry on the tradition "was really humbling."