

Honoring the fallen on Memorial Day

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Gallup hosts traditional events; dedicates new veterans cemetery

Each year, Memorial Day commemorations pull the community together as people reflect on and show their appreciation for the members of the military who serve their country past and present.

In Gallup, dubbed one of the most patriotic towns in America during the Rand McNally “Best of the Road” contest, it’s no different. Following the placement of wreaths at Hillcrest Cemetery and a parade, residents and visitors converged at the McKinley County Courthouse Square May 27.

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COURTHOUSE SQUARE CEREMONY

The ceremony started with a moment of a silence for Sen. John Pinto, D-McKinley/San Juan, who passed away May 24.

Multiple speakers took the stage, all wanting to voice their thanks to the veterans at the ceremony and to remember those who have passed on.

Mayor Jackie McKinney was one of those speakers. He said everyone present at the courthouse square had been touched by someone's military service in some way.

"It does a person's heart good to see you all come out," he said. "It's a lot to give one's life for their country."

Next to speak was New Mexico Lt. Gov. Howie Morales, who said that there is no other place he would rather be on Memorial Day than Gallup.

"It is an honor to serve alongside senators and representatives," he said. "There is no higher honor than service to others."

Rep. Patricia Lundstrom, D-Gallup, said the ceremonies at the courthouse square and for the new Gallup State Veterans Cemetery will let people see that Gallup will never let veterans down.

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“The national cemetery for all veterans and their families is something new to be proud of,” she said.

Next, Sen. George Munoz, D-Gallup, the grand marshal of the ceremony, was given a commemorative plaque on behalf of the Gallup McKinley Veterans Committee.

“Something rang true today: there are two people who will lay their life on the line, Jesus [Christ], or a soldier,” Munoz said as he accepted the plaque.

Jess Butler, Navy veteran and co-founder of the Prewitt veterans organization Rockin J Reawakenings, spoke with the *Sun* about what Memorial Day means to him.

“Memorial Day has a special meaning...That is about the top of my list. It means everything to us. We’re thankful for the guys that stand on that line and protect us. We’ve seen these people and we know that they’re there. Not just this day, and not just because it’s a national holiday. A lot of us have seen those guys not come back, and that cements that in your mind a little better.”

THE NEW VETERANS CEMETERY

The ceremonies continued later in the day at the site of the new Gallup Veterans State Cemetery, located at 333 Cemetery Drive off Hasler Road, south of McKinley County Juvenile Detention Center.

The new cemetery is part of the State Veterans’ Cemetery Program, a statewide initiative to construct additional state veterans’ cemeteries across New Mexico within the next five years.

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The program was launched in 2013 by Gov. Susana Martinez, with the goal of seeking construction funding through the Department of Veterans Affairs' Cemetery Grants Program.

Despite heavy winds, the crowd at the ribbon-cutting ceremony was enthusiastic in showing support for veterans, past and present.

Speakers from the courthouse square ceremony were also present to address the crowd at the cemetery.

"This is a great day for Gallup and the surrounding area," McKinney said.

"The cemetery will be an everlasting monument to the veterans who put the security of our country before their own," he said.

"It will be an eternal resting place [filled with the] dignity and honor they have earned," he added.

McKinney said the city council had to pull off a remarkable feat to get the property needed for the cemetery, but the council eventually came through.

Last fall, the City of Gallup placed an advertisement for bids for the construction of the road to the cemetery site. The project construction, including earthwork, called for 870 feet of new road, drainage channel, 885 feet of new water lines, sewer lines, and a force main, and was projected to cost just over \$318,000, with an additional \$250,000 for project development.

The road construction project was awarded to TLC Plumbing & Utility, of Albuquerque, during the Gallup City Council's Nov. 27 regular meeting. Two legislative grants and city bond funds made up the price of the project.

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The cemetery and adjacent sites were constructed by White Sands Construction under Huitt-Zollars, Inc.

George Eisenbach, director of the Veterans Cemetery Grants Program at the Department of Veterans Affairs, was present to address the crowd about what the cemetery means for veterans.

“A veteran dies two deaths: once when they take their last breath,” he said, “and once when no one speaks their name. I urge you all to continue to talk their names.”

When Munoz took the stage, he spoke about how he and Morales worked together on the project in the state legislature.

“The legislation passed the house and came to the senate,” Munoz said. “Then Senator Morales said there’s a chance for New Mexico to do something locally for veterans.”

Lundstrom said that it would have been easy to walk away from the project after other location sites did not pan out, but the city did not give up and was ultimately able to make the project work.

Addressing herself to the veterans, Lundstrom said, “If you want to always be regarded with the highest level of respect, come to Gallup.”