

## AMERICAN VETERANS HERITAGE CENTER, INC.

### 2015 ANNUAL REPORT

**American veterans Heritage Center, Inc. (“AVHC”)** continued its success during calendar year 2015:

#### **11th Annual Patriot Freedom Festival**

Always the highlight of AVHC’s year, the 11th Annual **Patriot Freedom Festival** was held on Saturday and Sunday, May 23-24, 2015. This free, family-friendly event honoring our veterans features memorial services, reenactors portraying soldiers of many different wars, the 4 Freedom Equestrian Team, musical entertainment, educational displays, student contests, genealogical research assistance, military vehicle displays, food, Dayton VA Medical Center historical district bus tours and the Miami Valley Military History Museum, to name but a few of the activities. Although getting an exact count of visitors can be difficult given the many entrances to the festival area, the Boy Scouts manning the two main gates counted 4,333 visitors during their hours of duty in 2015, leading to an estimated total of 10,000 visitors and participants, an exceptional turnout. This very successful event was made possible only through the effort of nearly 90 hard-working volunteers who put in 1,215 hours over the two day event---which does not even include the hundreds of hours of planning invested by AVHC’s Events Committee led by **Cindy Dafler** and its principal committees, Children’s Education and Art Contest, (**Bridget Newbury, chair**), Opening Ceremony (**Mike Turner, chair**), AVHC Gift Shop (**Mike Turner, chair**), Information Booth/Welcome Tent (**Bonnie Beaman Rice, chair**), Logistics (**Brent Davidson, chair**), Vendors (**Clarice Collins-Scott, chair**), Ancestry (**Carolyn Burns, chair**), Reenactors (**Mark Conrad, chair**), and Military Vehicles (**Ken Hoelscher, chair**).

One change in the schedule for the 2015 edition of the Patriot Freedom Festival consisted of moving the annual Armed Forces Day Run, Walk & Roll 5-K at the VA Medical Center to the Saturday before the festival to help reduce congestion when combined with the annual flag placement by the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts at the National Cemetery on the Saturday of Memorial Day weekend. This change was successful, and will continue in 2016.

The 12th annual edition of the Patriot Freedom Festival is scheduled for Saturday and Sunday, May 28-29, 2016. The Armed Forces Day 5-K will be held the preceding Saturday, May 21, 2016. Both events are held on the historic campus of the Dayton Veterans Affairs Medical Center.

#### **Louis B. Gunckel Grotto Lake Fountain**

Thanks to the strong partnership of OSU Extension Master Gardeners, AVHC and the Dayton VA Medical Center, a beautiful fountain was placed in the middle of the upper lake in the historic Grotto and gardens are of the campus. On June 17, 2015, the Louis B. Gunckel Grotto Lake Fountain was dedicated. The towering fountain of water not only adorns the lake but also serves as a source of peaceful and relaxing sound for patients and visitors who enjoy the tranquility of the restored Grotto. The fountain is named after Louis B. Gunckel, the Dayton lawyer who was instrumental in locating in Dayton the Central Branch of the National Asylum for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers (the predecessor of the Dayton VA Medical Center). Gunckel went on to serve on the national Board of Managers for the Home system for 12 years. Volunteers with the Greater Montgomery County Master Gardeners took the lead in fundraising for the project.

## **The Grotto, Home Depot and a New Ramp**

Another great improvement to the Grotto was made in 2015 thanks to a grant and assistance from **Home Depot**. Built by resident veterans in a former quarry nearly 140 years ago, the Dayton VA Medical Center's Grotto has been noted for its beauty and serenity for generations.

Unfortunately, the floor of the Grotto previously was accessible only by stone steps or a steep grade, thereby limiting visits by many who otherwise would be able to appreciate the gardens and lake. The answer to the accessibility issue, installed in late 2015, was a new ramp designed for use by wheelchairs and power chairs. Along with a retaining wall and handrails, the project was funded by Home Depot as part of their annual Celebration of Service campaign. A portion of the work on the ramp was completed by volunteers from Home Depot, the Greater Montgomery County Master Gardeners (OSU Extension) and AVHC. A great example of what many volunteers working together can accomplish!

## **Changes in the AVHC Board of Trustees**

AVHC was honored to have a very skilled new volunteer and trustee join the group in 2015.

**Karla Garrett Harshaw** is a skilled development professional who is the Regional Director of Development at Advocates for Basic Legal Equality/Legal Aid of Western Ohio. Prior to retiring from Cox Ohio Media in 2010, Karla had served as Editor of the Springfield News-Sun for 16 years and as Vice President of Community Development. She also has been a member of the Board of Trustees of Wright Dunbar Inc. Karla began advising the AVHC Board of Trustees on development issues in 2015 and was formally named as a trustee in early 2016. She brings to the Board much needed knowledge and experience in fund-raising.

At the same time, AVHC lost a very valued and active trustee when **Robert Kincses** chose for personal reasons not to stand for reelection to the Board of Trustees following the end of his term at the end of 2015. Robert has been instrumental to many of the most prominent initiatives of AVHC during and prior to his service on the Board of Trustees. It was Robert's foresight and initiative that brought the Master Gardeners to the Grotto, encouraging that group to dedicate their considerable energy and skill to maintaining and improving the Grotto and gardens after the Dayton VA Medical Center made a significant investment in the renovation of this wonderful space. In his years on the Board, Robert has served as a watchdog, an inspiration and a conscience for the organization. The Board of Trustees will miss Robert's contribution to the Board but looks forward to his continuing role as a key volunteer for the organization.

## **AVHC Governance Project**

Based on review and analysis conducted at strategic planning meetings in 2014 and 2015, including a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis conducted with the assistance of the Dayton chapter of the Service Corps of Retired Executives (SCORE), in 2015 the Board of Trustees implemented a new governance structure, in which the Board began relying more heavily on its standing committees to accomplish the work of the organization, with the Board meeting as a whole every other month. The Board's current standing committees consist of: Executive Committee (consisting of the officers, who meet by phone nearly every week), the Events Committee, the Grotto Committee, the Library/Military Museum/Office

Committee, the Fundraising Committee, the Special Projects Committee and the Outreach Committee.

## **Outreach**

AVHC continued its extensive outreach activities in 2015. In addition to the Patriot Freedom Festival, the AVHC's speakers bureau made 46 presentations to community organizations during 2015, with an additional 1,542 visitors signing the guestbook at the Putnam Library on the Dayton VA Medical Center campus. Another very successful outreach activity on campus was hosted by AVHC trustees **Margaret Kruckemeyer** and **Kathleen Hayes** on April 11, 2015 as the Dayton Chapter 326 of NOVA (Nurses of the VA) hosted 48 Girl Scouts for "Learning Day at Dayton VAMC," a full-day, multi-part learning event.

## **Preparations for a Walk of Honor**

AVHC's Special Projects Committee spent substantial time in 2015 laying the groundwork for a new project that will be formally launched in 2016. The Committee envisions a "Walk of Honor" on the Dayton VA Medical Center campus that will serve as both as a vehicle through which community members can honor individual veterans and a fundraising project for AVHC, through the sale of engraved bricks that will border a sidewalk in a prominent place on the campus. With the groundwork now laid for the project, an announcement will be forthcoming. AVHC anticipates dedicating income from the Walk of Honor to completion of the renovation of the organ in the Protestant Chapel at the Medical Center.

## **The Mother Home Reprinted**

In 2015, AVHC reprinted **Curt Dalton's** wonderful illustrated history of the Dayton VA Medical Center, "*The Mother Home: A History of the Dayton Soldier's Home in 3-D.*" The book uses 150 stereoscopic views of the Central Branch of the National Home from the era in which the Central Branch was the largest tourist attraction west of the Alleghenies. Earlier printings had completely sold out, and the book was virtually unobtainable. Ordering information can be found on AVHC's website, [www.americanveteransheritage.com](http://www.americanveteransheritage.com)

## **Loss of Honorary Trustee Dale Huffman**

AVHC lost a valued friend and Honorary Trustee with the death of retired *Dayton Daily News* columnist Dale Huffman at age 79 in July, 2015. Huffman's 1998 article about the closing of the historic Protestant Chapel ("*Chapel Needs a Prayer*") was the clarion call that led to the organization of AVHC and the eventual renovation of the Chapel. Our condolences go out to his family.

## **Other Projects**

During 2015, AVHC continued to monitor and encouraging developments with respect to the potential location of the national Department of Veterans Affairs Archives in Dayton. Although no announcement was made in 2015, AVHC remains confident that this very significant project for Dayton eventually will move forward.

A number of AVHC volunteers and trustees participated in public hearings regarding a potential Communities for Veterans project that would renovate the Doctors' Row cottages in the Historic District and construct a multi-story structure for homeless veterans housing. AVHC supports additional housing opportunities for homeless veterans and intends to work to assure that any new construction will be respectful of the Dayton VA Medical Center's status as a dedicated National Historic Landmark.

Also during 2015, AVHC continued to participate in discussions concerning future expansion opportunities for the Dayton National Cemetery and how that expansion can occur without negativity impacting the Historic District.

AVHC representatives have been asked to serve on a committee organized by Dayton VA Medical Center Glenn Costie to work on plans for the celebration of the 150th anniversary of the establishment of the Dayton VA Medical Center in 2017.

AVHC made it easier during 2015 for its many friends to contribute to the organization through its website. A Paypal donation button now appears on the home page of its website, [www.AmericanVeteransHeritage.org](http://www.AmericanVeteransHeritage.org)

AVHC also once again was selected as a Combined Federal Campaign-approved nonprofit organization.

## **2016 Strategic Priorities**

At its annual planning session in December 2015, the trustees approved five strategic priorities for 2016 (the trustees also acknowledged that two priorities from 2015 – expansion of the Dayton National Cemetery and location of the VA archives in Dayton – remain extremely important).

1. Construction of the "Walk of Honor."
2. Renovation of Doctors Row.
3. Renovation and reuse of the Bus/Trolley Depot.
4. Renovation of the Catholic Chapel.
5. Restoration of the Protestant Chapel organ to operating condition.

AVHC intends to prioritize its efforts in 2016 towards reaching these strategic goals.

Respectfully submitted,  
David A. Neuhardt  
Secretary, American Veterans Heritage Center, Inc.  
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