

LOCAL NEWS

ARMED SERVICES



Artist rendering

An artist's rendering depicts the Hispanic-American Veterans Memorial planned for the Buffalo and Erie County Naval & Military Park. Ground will be broken for the memorial next Friday.

Hispanic veterans memorial planned

By LOU MICHEL

NEWS STAFF REPORTER

Local Hispanic veterans who served in the U.S. armed forces and their families will soon have a place to go in search of comfort and recognition for having defended America.

At 4 p.m. on Veterans Day, next Friday, members of the Hispanic community, politicians and military officials will gather at the Buffalo and Erie County Naval & Military Park to break ground for a memorial honoring the region's Hispanic veterans.

"This will be a symbol of recognition and also something of honor to look up to for our children and help them be proud of being American," said Casimiro D. Rodriguez, a member of the Hispanic-American Veterans Memorial Committee of Western New York.

Mayor Byron W. Brown expressed strong support for the memorial and pointed out that it will be one of only a handful in the country drawing attention to an ethnic group of veterans.

"Not only will this be a way to recognize the efforts and service of Hispanic veterans, this will be the first memorial of this type in upstate New York and one of the few memorials of this type in the nation," Brown said.

The \$140,500 memorial will be paid for with donations from indi-

viduals, community, business and corporate sponsors through a fund drive that has already begun.

Western New York, Rodriguez said, is home to hundreds of Hispanic veterans and an estimated 75,000 residents of Hispanic ancestry.

"We are appealing to corporations and businesses to help bring this to a realization," said Rodriguez, who is also chairman of the Hispanic Heritage Council of Western New York.

Perhaps Rodriguez, who never served in the Armed Forces, understands better than most the sacrifice families of all ethnic backgrounds make in sending loved ones into the military and often to war.

His brother, Gabriel A. Rodriguez, was drafted into the Army in 1968 and fought in Vietnam. When the young father returned home and resumed work at Ford Motor Co.'s Buffalo Stamping Plant, an undiagnosed case of post-traumatic stress disorder bedeviled him.

"He would tell me that he experienced flashbacks of Vietnam every time the machines at the factory stamped a blank sheet of metal," Rodriguez recalled of his brother.

Over the years, war memories continued to deeply trouble him and in 1981, Gabriel Rodriguez took his own life.

"He is a good example of the symptoms many of our soldiers back then experienced, but the government didn't diagnose it. There was no help for them back then," Rodriguez said.

The memory of the psychologically injured Vietnam soldier was honored years ago when area Hispanic veterans formed Gabriel A. Rodriguez Post 1928, American Legion, though it is no longer in existence.

But the planned memorial will have etched into it "Gabriel A. Rodriguez American Legion Post 1928" and the "65th Infantry Regiment," to also honor a wing of the Army organized in 1899 primarily for Puerto Rican soldiers.

The memorial also will have the American flag and the flags of 21 Hispanic nations carved into its black, granite surface.

Rodriguez says the goal is to have the monument completed in time for Memorial Day 2012. It will be situated between the Merchant Marines and the Korean War memorials with the USS The Sullivans serving as a backdrop.

Anyone wishing to make a donation to the construction of the memorial can by sending it to the Hispanic-American Veterans Memorial Committee of Western New York, P.O. Box 532, Buffalo, N.Y., 14201.

email: lmichel@buffnews.com