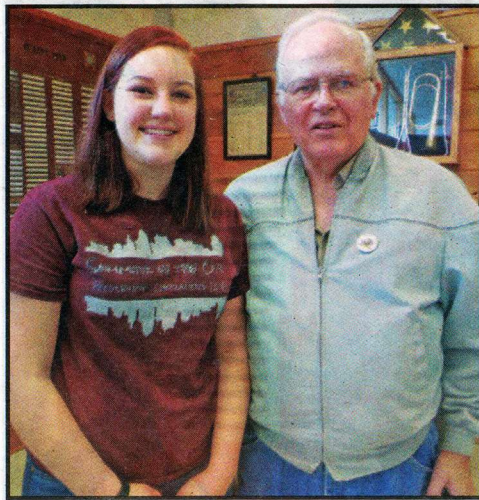


VFW art entry leads to new friendship for RAHS senior and local veteran



Rachel Anderson stands by Fritz Cunningham, the subject of her drawing for the VFW Patriotic Art Contest.



Rachel Anderson holds up her drawing of local veteran Fritz Cunningham.

An entry into the Reedsburg Veterans of Foreign Wars Auxiliary Patriotic Art Contest has led to a new friendship for Reedsburg Area High School senior Rachel Anderson. Through it she made a new friend in local veteran Fritz Cunningham.

Rachel doesn't have any veterans in her family. When she entered the Patriotic Contest as a junior, her artistic entry included generic veterans. She noticed that most other entries were from students who had a personal connection with a veteran. "I wanted to do a more personal drawing," she says of her entry this year.

Her mother suggested Fritz, who served 22 years in the U.S. Navy, as the subject for her entry. While Rachel had seen him when he substitute taught at the high school a few times, she really didn't know him. "He turned out to be a really great guy," she says. She got to know him when she interviewed him before starting her artwork.

With her submission of her drawings of Fritz, which took close to 20 hours to complete, she wrote, "My drawing represents the idea that when someone serves, their service does not just end after their time is up. It never does. It's a lifelong commitment filled with the remnants of good memories, nightmares and the graciousness of another day on earth. They must face the consequences, mentally, physically and emotionally, of the great service they have done for our country.

These drawings are of a veteran in my community. I chose to interview him to get an idea of who he is as a person and a veteran, but also because it gave me the opportunity to focus on someone from my own community. His name is Fritz Cunningham. As a child he moved from foster home to foster home until he joined the Navy at the age of 19, which is the drawing on the right. He served for 22 years and moved up the ranks as the years went on. The drawing on the left is of him at around 34 years old. The center drawing is him only a couple weeks ago at age 74.

He is a very admired, loved man, who gave back to the community in so many different ways. Not only did he serve over two decades in the Navy, he also gave his time to be a substitute teacher, a very handy carpenter and a lifetime member of the VFW. He is the prime example of never-ending service.

Unfortunately, he can't do most things by himself any more. He can't carve wood and he can't leave his house by himself. Fritz believes he was affected by Agent Orange in Vietnam during one of his duties and because of this exposure now suffers from Parkinson's disease, has no sense of taste or smell and he must take medication to sleep....

His sacrifice to our country has continued throughout his whole life and that sacrifice is represented in my picture. He has inspired me in so many ways and I can't thank him enough for what he has sacrificed. Once a sailor, always a sailor."

Rachel's drawing was the local winner of the VFW Auxiliary Patriotic Art Contest. Her artwork will go on to be judged at the state level and possibly nationally. She has the opportunity to win scholarship money. After the judging is done, the drawing will be returned to her, then Rachel will give it to Fritz.

She says that has been her plan from the start. "I immediately said, I'll be giving it to him as a kind of tribute to him for what he's done."

While she honors Fritz for what he has done for his country and community, Fritz has also always been one who has reached out to support the young people of the community. He was the transportation, building and grounds supervisor for the Reedsburg School District for several years. He also was the coordinator of student writing contests for the Reedsburg VFW for several years, until his health made that difficult to do.