

Bench memorializes Beclabito soldier

Troy Orion Tom remembered during motorcycle run

— By Alysa Landry —

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BECLABITO — Sgt. Troy Orion Tom's grandmother inhaled the heat from a torch Thursday lit to honor her grandson and all other veterans missing or killed in action.

Nellie Benally closed her eyes for a moment before passing the torch to another family member. The woman was one of hundreds of Navajo and Hopi tribal members to gather in Beclabito to honor veterans during the eighth annual Honor Run through Indian country.

"Today is really a great day," said Tom's father, David Tom, who serves as a delegate to the Navajo Tribal Council. "We're proud of him, and we have all his friends and neighbors here."

Honor Run riders, in conjunction with Operation Carry the Flame, selected Beclabito for a stop because of Tom, who was killed in action in Afghanistan last August. About 85 motorcyclists participated, filling the parking lot near the chapter house with their shiny machines.

The motorcycle aficionados will continue the ride to Washington, D.C., said King Cavalier, president of Operation Carry the Flame. The organization's mission is reach out to families in pain and let them know someone cares, he said.

"We go through a very quiet time when we don't know where our loved ones are," Cavalier said of those mourning for warriors either missing or killed in action. "I do this to reconcile the trauma military families go through."

Before passing the torch around a circle of veterans and motorcyclists, Cavalier took a moment to console Tom's parents and hug his mother, Carolyn.

"Children have parents coming home with wounds they can't see," said Cavalier, who was a teen when his father went to Vietnam. "Families have traumas from this that you can't see."

Thursday's event also included dedication of a bench in Tom's name. Chapter officials and community members worked together to build a pavilion and put in landscaping at a park next to the chapter house. The park eventually will commemorate veterans from the community and local residents affected by uranium mining, Chapter President George Kelly said.

The chapter also erected billboards visible from U.S. 64 at the east and west entrances into the community. Tom's picture greets all who visit, Kelly said.

"We want to remember that one of our local kids got killed overseas," he said. "We want to honor Troy."

Tom, 21, was killed Aug. 18, 2009, in Arghandab, Afghanistan. He was one of two soldiers killed when an improvised explosive device detonated near their unit.

Tom, a 2006 Aztec High School graduate, attended Beclabito Day School and T'iis Nazbas Community School in Teec Nos Pos, Ariz. He joined the military to become physically and mentally strong, David Tom said.

Tom was deployed less than a month before his death. He posthumously was promoted to sergeant.

David Tom said the family still is mourning nine months after his son's death. "As a parent, it really is difficult," he said. "We're still grieving. Holidays and special days come, and he doesn't come home."

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