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Region

Wreaths Across America: Newport News church to decorate Hampton National Cemetery

[By Maegan Smith](#)

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As the pallets of brand-new wreaths and bows were loaded onto a borrowed truck, there was a last-second realization.

Elise Wall and Kurt Lowery were short at least 100 bows.

"We'll take care of it," said Corrine Jamison, shift manager at Walmart in Yorktown, who has been helping the youth leaders from St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in Newport News purchase the 2,500 new wreaths from the retailer.

At noon Saturday, Wall and Lowery, along with a team of volunteers, will lay the wreaths on graves at Hampton National Cemetery.

This is the fourth year they have done so as part of a program called Wreaths Across America.

"We think this should really make a statement," Wall said. "There are so many people who don't even realize this cemetery is here."

Wreaths Across America is a national effort in which volunteers adorn the graves of more than 150,000 veterans nationwide with wreaths. The event is held every year on the second Saturday in December and began as an extension of the Arlington Wreath Project, which started in 1992 when a Maine-based family business, Worcester Wreath, donated 5,000 wreaths to be laid at Arlington National Cemetery.

The effort expanded in 2006 to include veterans cemeteries in all 50 states, District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and U.S. veterans cemeteries in foreign countries, with Worcester Wreath donating more than 25,000 wreaths to the project last year.

The St. Andrew's youth group became involved four years ago when Lowery saw photos of wreaths at Arlington National Cemetery.

"We decided it would be a worthwhile thing to do," Wall said. "It really has been a wonderful project to connect kids with the military. To help them (children) feel like they are giving what they can."

The wreaths St. Andrew's places are artificial, and each year it raises money to add to the collection it houses in a storage pod at Tommy Garner's Heating and Air Conditioning on Warwick Boulevard in Newport News. With this new purchase, the tally stands at 4,500.

Sponsors for the project include Branscome Inc., a Williamsburg-based construction contractor that donated the truck used to load and transport the new wreaths, and W.M. Jordan, a Newport News-based contractor that donated money.

For St. Andrew's, the task isn't just in raising the money. The red bows affixed to each wreath are an effort in themselves.

"It's the bows that really kill us," Wall said. "But they make such an impact to the overall look."

Volunteers who assist in the wreath-laying include local Girl Scout troops, Newport News Daughters of the American Revolution, Newport News Rotary Club and other local volunteer and nonprofit organizations. Veterans and their families are also expected to attend.

"We have a long list of volunteers, and it just keeps growing," said Marge Helgerson, director of Hampton National Cemetery. Wreaths Across America "is beautiful. It makes our place more beautiful."

About the program

The nationwide wreath-laying project began in 2006.

The nonprofit organization Wreaths Across America was started in 2007 by the Worcester family of Harrington, Maine, in response to quick growth of the project.

Each year, a seven-day procession from Maine to Virginia delivers all the wreaths donated by Worcester Wreath to Arlington National Cemetery.

For more information on the national effort, visit www.wreathscrossamerica.org

On Saturday

Wreaths will be laid at more than 400 state and national veterans cemeteries at noon.

Albert Horton Memorial Veterans Cemetery in Suffolk and Yorktown National Cemetery will also hold wreath-layings.

To donate to St. Andrew's Episcopal Church's wreath project, call 595-0371.

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