

CRAGUN'S FAMILY FUN DAY



John Vessey Jr., former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, spoke at Cragun's Family Fun Day on Sunday at the resort. The event honored military personnel and their families with games and rides. The event benefited the Minnesota Military Family Foundation. For more photos, see spotted.brainerddispatch.com.

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A time for fun

Event celebrates veterans with joy

BY MATT ERICKSON
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EAST GULL LAKE —

On Monday, solemn Memorial Day observations are scheduled across the U.S. in honor of those who have died serving the country.

On Sunday at Cragun's Conference and Golf Resort in East Gull Lake, the mood was anything but somber as hundreds of people, mostly veterans and their families, gathered for the Cragun's Family Fun Day military appreciation event.

"Today it's time to have fun," said Retired Gen. John Vessey Jr., former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who was the keynote speaker for Sunday's event. "I'm sure all the veterans who have served, have given their lives, would say to us, 'Go ahead and have some fun.' When we put flags on their graves and have more solemn ceremonies than we're having (Sunday), they'd also say, 'Thanks for those ceremonies.' But more important, they'd say to us, 'Preserve what we have fought for. Preserve the freedoms we have fought for.'"

Cragun's Family Fun Day, in its first year, featured an entire day of events including Humvee rides for kids, carnival games, a military obstacle course, food, an animal show and a silent auction.

Though the skies threatened, the rain held off for the start of Sunday's events, with a parade of Patriot Guard riders, a 21-gun salute and color guard presentation, taps and the National Anthem.

"It's been perfect," Dutch Cragun, owner of Cragun's Resort, said following Vessey's speech. "We aren't melting in the sun. Like General Vessey said, it's the job of a military man to stand in the rain, but we didn't have to do that, either. It's cool outside and what an amazing guy he's been. (Vessey) is in his 80s and here he is walking around, talking to people and shaking hands. This is a national treasure and we're got him here for a couple of hours. It's been wonderful."

Vessey asked those in attendance to say a little prayer of thanks for every veteran who had served the U.S., from the Battle of Yorktown during the Revolutionary War to the Iraq War today.

He also asked that people preserve the freedoms soldiers have fought for by keeping the country's defenses strong, paying attention to the U.S.'s relations with the rest of the world, obeying laws, paying taxes, making sensible votes and giving children a good education.

"Then soldiers would understand what they fought for would be worthwhile," Vessey said. "If we remember that, and each one of us takes personally the

responsibility to preserve the freedoms for which those people fought, we'll continue to have a wonderful nation."

"We've got the best nation in world. It's not perfect - it has warts, sores and plenty of opportunities for improvement but it is in fact the best, and only we can make it better."

Minnesota Army National Guard Maj. Michael Murray, who introduced Vessey, said the most important lesson he learned at basic training in 1988 was the importance of having someone watch his back.

When he was deployed to Iraq for 16 months and had to leave his wife and young son behind at home, that lesson proved more true than he realized, Murray said.

"This gives me an opportunity to actually see, or feel, those boots next to me, those people in the community that have reached out and covered my back," while he was deployed, Murray said. "That was the part I never thought I would have to worry about - my family. But in the months I was in Iraq, nothing worried more. It gave me comfort that people like yourselves were here to take care of them."

All the proceeds from Sunday's event were go toward the Minnesota Military

Family Foundation, Cragun said. His resort also will serve as a drop site for any donations - cash or items - that people want to make for soldiers and their families.

Kathryn Stotka, director of sales at Cragun's and organizer of Sunday's events, said she was moved by the ceremony to open the program.

"It gives you goose bumps. When they did the color guard, taps and the National Anthem there wasn't a dry eye in the house, I can tell you that," Stotka said. "A lot of people are so far removed from this, it's like a little piece of reality because these (soldiers) lived it every day."

Cragun said it is his intention to make the Family Fun Day military appreciation event an annual tradition at his resort.

"(Sunday) was the first and we hope to have many, many more after today," Cragun said. "(Memorial Day) is to honor dead but today we're honoring our living solders and the people who have served."

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