

A Home Run

An Oneida Tribe of Wisconsin elder's visionary program honors veterans through baseball

BY LYNN ARMITAGE

Liz Somers will never forget the first Major League Baseball game she attended. It was a perfect summer day—September 2, 2012—when the Milwaukee Brewers hit five home runs and swept the Pittsburgh Pirates, a contender for a wild-card playoff spot, at their home field of Miller Park.

ers were standing up and very much engaged, too. It felt good. Really good,” recalled Somers, who retired from the Navy in 2000 as a commander.

The mother of three added that her children thought it was cool to see their mom's face on the scoreboard. “Baseball is a family-oriented event, so there were

Air Medals and Purple Hearts.

It is the brainchild of James King Overman, Oneida Tribe of Wisconsin, an 80-year-old retired Air Force fighter pilot from Oneida, Wisconsin. Overman envisioned this program as a way to combine two great passions: his lifetime love of baseball and his determination to thank distinguished veterans for their exemplary service to our country in an out-of-the-ordinary way.

Overman knows something about military service himself. A retired Air Force major, he served in both the Korean and Vietnam wars, earning three Distinguished Flying Crosses and 18 Air Medals. He hails from a family of warriors, too. He says his maternal grandfather, Adam King, was an Oneida from Wisconsin and fought as a conscript in the Civil War. His father, Frank Overman, was the last surviving member of the Lost Battalion, U.S. units that were isolated by the Germans in the Argonne in 1918 during World War I, and is buried at Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia. And Overman's late brother, David was a retired master sergeant in the Air Force.

Overman's long-term vision is to get Recognition Equals Respect adopted by all 30 major-league franchises, so that each team can honor its own local veterans. The first event this season, slated for April 7 at Miller Park, will honor Purple Heart recipients living in Wisconsin—four will be from the Oneida Tribe of Wisconsin.

Renee Simpson, the state senior vice commander of the Wisconsin department of Veterans of Foreign Wars, is helping Overman pull together the list of non-Native honorees. “I think it is an outstanding way to recognize our service members who have come forward and served their country honorably,” she said.

Simpson also said that many of the veterans she has contacted who have earned Purple Hearts are humbled by the invitation. “They are honored by all of this, but they don't think they have done anything more than what everyone else has been asked to do. They just happened to get wounded in the line of duty.”



Beyond memorials: A new program honors vets at Major League Baseball games.

Great baseball aside, what made the day especially memorable was the recognition that 55-year-old Somers, the highest-ranking female veteran of the Oneida Tribe of Wisconsin, received along with 11 other decorated veterans from Wisconsin in the stands. As they stood at attention at home plate before the game started, a close-up of each veteran's face was shown on the scoreboard next to her individual military biography as the enthusiastic crowd roared its appreciation.

“We were right there and could see the fans in front of us—and the play-

a lot of kids, like mine, there. I think it was a great way to honor vets and keep it front and center that there are wars going on and there are families sharing that burden.”

Recognition Equals Respect is a special program that will be presented six times at Miller Park this year to honor both Native and non-Native elite warriors in Wisconsin—servicemen and women from every branch of the military who have gone above and beyond the call of duty, earning distinction and in many cases, Silver Stars, Distinguished Flying Crosses, Bronze Stars,