

SOLDIERS REMEMBERED



Parents of Pvt. Christopher M. Acozer hold their fallen son's dog tags and a portrait in their hands. Pvt. Acozer was killed during small arms fire on Nov. 19, 2005.



Lt. Governor Pat Quinn offers his respect to all the fallen soldiers and the families of Illinois. Quinn was present for the college's unveiling of Portrait of a Soldier. The exhibition is located on the first and second floor of the library.

Dave Larson and Anne Larson gaze at the portraits of fallen soldiers from Illinois. The Larson family lost their son Lance Cpl. Nicholas D. Larson to enemy fire on Nov. 9, 2004.



Jennifer Landeck holds back tears as her mother Vicky comforts her. The Landeck's lost their son Capt. Kevin C. Landeck by a roadside bomb on Feb. 2, 2007.

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In a subdued ceremony of no more than 70 people, Lieutenant Governor Pat Quinn unveiled the exhibit "Portraits of a Soldier" last Friday. College President Sunil Chund described the exhibit as "deeply moving and deeply important" during his introductory remarks.

Joining Quinn at the podium surrounded by yellow mums were representatives from six Gold Star families.

Among those present were Joseph and Gloria Caruso, parents of Marine Sgt. David Caruso.

"Events like these are difficult, but we want these men and women to never be forgotten so we go," Gloria Caruso said.

Caruso died on Nov. 9, 2004 in Fallujah protecting the six men in his team from a machine gun nest.

As assistant team leader, he stopped at an alleyway entrance to return fire from four men and was shot.

Caruso was posthumously awarded a bronze star with a combat V, given for valor in combat.

Caruso had just turned 25, and was hoping to complete a second four-year term of enlistment.

He was in Iraq for a total of five and a half years serving in a Marine Corps

Force Reconnaissance unit. Trained as an Army Ranger as well, Caruso performed high-risk, highly specialized missions. His ambition was to become a member of the FBI or CIA.

David and Anne Larson's son died on the same day in Fallujah. The two sets of parents did not know each other at the time, but later met through the Marine Parents Association.

"You just dread coming to these things because it brings back memories. It's all about remembering and not forgetting and that was my whole thought. The portraits are a wonderful way to remember them," Anne Larson said.

Marine Lance Corporal Nicholas Larson was part of a four-man team in charge of clearing the city's houses of civilians.

One man short due the death of a member of their team just the previous week, the remaining three men encountered open fire and Larson and another Marine were killed. Larson was 19 years old.

"Nick always wanted to join the Marines. His goal was to become a Navy Seal," Anne Larson said.

Larson went to boot camp in September of 2003 and died 14 months later.

Proud of his family's military back-

ground, Larson's mother described him as being very close to his grandfather, an Army veteran; his grandmother was in the Army Nursing Corps, and his father was in the Navy.

Larson's sister was 16 when he died, and her mother credited the support of a youth group for helping her cope with his death.

"I don't know if someone should have to go through that. She rarely talks about it. I try to put myself in her shoes. I don't know what I would have done, how she handled it when me and my husband were grieving so horribly," Larson said.

The portraits of 170 men and women from Illinois killed in the Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts were on display until Tuesday.

One of the many visitors to the exhibit was Ken Nichols, an Army veteran searching for the picture of his friend.

"You can't really put a personal face on war. It's very impersonal. In combat you don't shoot at the person, you shoot at the figure," Nichols said.

Nichols was at Walter Reed Army Medical Center recovering from a shrapnel injury to his back when news of his friends' death reached him.

Nichols was wearing a silver crucifix that had belonged to his friend,

and intended to hang it on the portrait's edge.

Linda Hickman, an administrative assistant in the Business and Technical Division, experienced her future son-in-law's return from Iraq a week before the exhibit.

Looking at the portraits, she expressed how difficult it had been for her daughter to endure through her fiancé's two tours of duty, the first lasting 16 months and the second, 14 months.

"For us it was to the point where it was easier not to read a newspaper or watch TV. I think it has more meaning because I know someone who was over there. You have a whole different outlook on it. I can't imagine being a mother of one of these guys," Hickman said.

Personal notes and pictures were attached to several of the portraits.

A letter taped to the portrait of First Sergeant Ernest E. Utt read, "Thank you for your leadership, devotion and courage. It only seems like yesterday that I was standing in front of you at the NCO board...and here we are three years later. I'm sorry. I and thousands of other soldiers will forever be grateful to the contribution you made to our lives and our country. You will always be in our thoughts and prayers."