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"News from Next Door"

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REMEMBERING those who serve



Perquimans Weekly photo by CATHY WILSON

Veterans honored

CATHY WILSON
Staff Writer

Approximately 150 people gathered underneath the shade of the courthouse trees Monday morning and remembered those who serve and have served this country.

"We honor those who served so faithfully and so humbly," said Shirley Wiggins, retired captain, U.S. Navy. "We will never forget you."

Wiggins was the guest speaker during the Memorial Day observance that included, for the first time, the county's new veterans' memorial and the brick walkway honoring and memorializing county veterans from all branches of service.

She gave a brief history of how Memorial Day came to be, and how it changed in 1968 from honoring just those who died in service to honoring all veterans.

"Whenever you see a

veteran, especially one who is hurt badly, don't look on them with pity," she said. "Look on them with love and remember what they went through for this country."

The Pledge of Allegiance was led by 97-year-old Jay Dillon, believed to be the oldest living World War II veteran. He served with the Navy.

Charlie Skinner, a Marine veteran, gave a brief history of each branch of service as members of the Perquimans High School band played each branch's special song. A veteran of each branch of service presented their service flag and placed each of the flags in the flag holders which line the brick walkway leading up to the memorial.

Mack Nixon and Shirley Wiggins, both members of the Perquimans County Board of Commissioners, placed a wreath at the base of the memorial.

MACK NIXON AND SHIRLEY Wiggins, members of the Perquimans County Board of Commissioners, place a wreath at the base of the veterans' memorial in honor of all veterans who have served and who are serving this country. Wiggins was the guest speaker for Monday's Memorial Day ceremony. Jay Dillon, 97, is believed to be the oldest local World War II veteran. He led the crowd in the Pledge of Allegiance during the Memorial Day ceremony.



Ken Rominger, commander of the American Legion Post 126, said 500 flags were placed on the graves of veterans throughout the county in observance of Memorial Day. He also explained the table set for one on the

courthouse green in observance of the military's missing in action.

The flag on the courthouse square flew at half mast as the band members concluded the ceremony by playing "Taps" on trumpets.

Two plead guilty to 2006 murder

Victim's family upset over plea

CATHY WILSON
Staff Writer

Rhonda Wilson says her husband didn't have to die the way he did.

Fifty year-old Michael Wilson died in June nearly two years ago after being kicked and beaten in the driveway of a New Hope home.

The two young men charged with murder in connection with his death accepted negotiated plea agreements in court last week. One pleaded guilty to voluntary manslaughter while the other pleaded guilty to involuntary manslaughter.

Clayton James of Norfolk, Va., was sentenced to a minimum of 48 months and a maximum of 67 months for voluntary manslaughter. Skylar Spence of Perquimans County was sentenced to a minimum of 16 months and a maximum of 20 months for involuntary manslaughter. Both men received credit for time served in jail while waiting to stand trial, and both were ordered to pay Wilson's burial expenses.

While Assistant District Attorney Michael Johnson says the plea agreements were reached to avoid the possibility of getting a not guilty verdict during trial, family members and law enforcement officials alike are upset that murder charges were reduced.

"It's not right. It's not right at all," said Wilson's widow. "I'm not a prejudiced person, but if a white man had been killed, they (James and Spence) would have gotten more time."

Perquimans County Sheriff Eric Tilley says the case is a prime example of what happens when people take the law into their own hands. Plea agreements may not discourage others from doing the same thing in the future.

Both young men are relatives of Wilson's then live-in girlfriend, Gloria "Pinky" Thomas. Police say Michael Wilson and Thomas argued at the house that night, and, at some point, Spence and James joined in, knocked Wilson to the ground and kicked him repeatedly in the head.

Johnson said James took the leadership role in the incident, and that Spence backed off.

Family members told presiding Judge W. Russell Duke Jr. that Wilson suffered residual effects from a stroke several years ago that left one side immobile. He dragged one leg and had little use of the arm on that same side, adding that Wilson could not have fought back. Wilson had also suffered a heart attack in years past.

Court papers filed by Spence's attorney, however, alleged that Wilson initiated the attack by confronting Thomas with a knife prior to a verbal confrontation.

According to police reports, Wilson apparently died around 1:30 a.m. but the sheriff's department and emergency services weren't called until an hour later. Thomas reportedly told law enforcement officials she and Wilson had an altercation and at some point, he fell to the ground face first. She tried to get him up off the ground, but couldn't. Because the phone in the house was not working, she drove to the home of some of Wilson's family members who lived nearby and asked them to return to the house with her. When family members saw Wilson, they called 9-1-1 on a cell phone.

Police also said Thomas initially told investigators that only she, her teenaged grandson and Wilson were at the residence at the time of the incident. However, Thomas eventually admitted that five people were actually there at the time of Wilson's death including James and Spence.

In past news accounts of the incident, there was no mention of a knife being found at the scene.

According to court papers filed by the attorney for James, an autopsy was performed on Wilson by the state's medical examiner on June 6 stating that Wilson died from blunt force injury to the head. Court papers also show that the autopsy report determined Wilson's heart disease, caused by hardening of the arteries, was a significant factor contributing to his death, but that if he "had not sustained the significant head injuries, he would not have died of his heart disease at the time that he did die."

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WEEKEND WEATHER

THURSDAY
HIGH: 74 LOW: 58
PARTLY CLOUDY

FRIDAY
HIGH: 79 LOW: 62
PARTLY CLOUDY

SATURDAY
HIGH: 81 LOW: 67
PARTLY CLOUDY



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Law officers concerned over pleas, reductions

CATHY WILSON
Staff Writer

During last week's three-day superior court session in Perquimans County, at least 45 felony charges were either dismissed or reduced to misdemeanors as the result of negotiated plea agreements.

Law enforcement officials here are concerned about the message it sends to criminals. The prosecutor says it's a routine process due to limited court time.

For Perquimans Sheriff Eric Tilley and his department, seeing felony charges reduced or dismissed after months of hard work on their end is frustrating. They also have to explain to the crime victims or to their family members why those arrested for the crime got off lightly.

But, they are even more concerned about the fact that lack of felony convictions allows criminals to purchase hand guns that might lead to more violent crime.

"For the last four years, it's gotten progressively worse," said Tilley of the number of plea agreements reached in superior court. "We don't get notified of the plea agreements. My office is open to the public. When the crime victim wants to know why things happen in court that I have no control over, they don't go to the district attorney's office. They come to my office. I am fed up with answering for them (district attorney's office). Something's got to give."

Assistant District Attorney Michael Johnson says negotiated plea agreements are routine and are done on a case by case basis.

Limited court time in the county also impacts arranging plea agreements, he said.

For example, last week William Elliott, originally charged with five counts of indecent liberties with a child, pleaded guilty to misdemeanor assault on a female instead as the result of a negotiated plea agreement. The victim in the case, however, refused to testify. Elliott received 60 days in jail and a fine.

"It's (plea agreement) a compromise...taking something rather than it be an acquittal," Johnson said.

Tilley, however, has confidence in area law enforcement officials and points out that by the time a case reaches superior court, their work has already passed three tests: 1) when a warrant is obtained from a magistrate to arrest; 2) dur-

ing a probable cause hearing in district court; and 3) when enough evidence is presented to a grand jury which determines whether or not the accused stands trial in superior court.

"If the evidence passes those tests, there's enough evidence there to convict," he said.

In North Carolina, a not guilty plea requires a jury trial, a process that requires bringing several potential jurors to court which takes additional time.

Last week's superior court session was originally scheduled to be held all week, but the session was completed on Wednesday. On a court calendar that originally contained 119 charges, 45 felonies were dismissed or reduced, and 64 counts were continued until another court date.