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Going the extra mile to express gratitude

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Pat Gavros set off on a journey last month, in a personal show of gratitude to the nation's veterans and first responders.

It was a 21-day trip that took her through 19 states, with stops at veterans' homes, police and fire stations, and memorials.

Along the way, Gavros handed out plaques and cards, thanking the men and women she met for their service.



Pat Gavros, who lives in Dade City, spent 21 days on the road delivering a message of gratitude to the nation's veterans and first responders during her Gratitude Journey in May. (B.C. Manion/Staff Photo)

She made the trip alone. She ate inexpensive meals and carried apples, bananas, yogurt and water in the car.

She had scheduled many of the visits she made during her travels, but there were spontaneous stops, as well.

She said she made the trip because when it comes to patriotism, she considers the word to be more of a verb than a noun.

“Talk is cheap,” Gavros said, adding, in matters of gratitude, actions are what count.

“I just am passionate about honoring our veterans. I thought, why don’t I drive to different states and visit different veterans’ homes and bring some kind of a little token of my gratitude.

“Then, when I started thinking about it, I thought, ‘You know what? Our first responders – those people in uniform — they’re part of our patriotic fabric. The people that keep us safe. They allow us to live the lifestyle without ever giving it a thought. You never think, ‘Oh, if my house burns, who can I call?’ ” she said.

Gavros began planning the trip in January, choosing a path that included important memorials and was compact enough she could make it happen.

And, she began seeking supporters.

“My biggest supporter, who gave me a beautiful 2015 RAV 4 to drive, was Wesley Chapel Toyota. They saw the vision, and they supplied a nice, safe car for me,” said Gavros, who recently reluctantly returned the vehicle to the dealership.

“I had a couple of hotels that gave me a few nights’ lodging,” she added.

But the financial support she’d been hoping to attract failed to materialize.

That didn’t dissuade Gavros.

She began her journey with a stop in Dade City, then headed east and north. She visited 42 cities, including stops in Washington D.C., Oklahoma City and even Ferguson, Missouri.

She visited famous memorials, as well as police and fire stations in lesser-known places.

She doled out words of appreciation and mementoes of gratitude wherever she went.

Sometimes, a local police station would make a big deal of her visit, she said.

Other encounters were smaller and more personal.

She handed out 40 plaques, including one to a patrol officer sitting in his cruiser and another to a highway patrol officer standing on the side of a road.

Gavros received badges and commemorative coins from first responders, documenting her many stops.

The effort was more physically demanding than she had expected.

She had to rise by 5 a.m., each day, to stick to her itinerary.

“I wasn’t out on a vacation. I was on a mission,” the Dade City woman said.

Besides being exhausted at times, she got lonely, too.

Those spells happened mostly during long treks between cities.

“There were some days when I was really down. You’re wondering: ‘Does it matter?’ ” Gavros said.

But then, she had experiences that erased any doubts.

One of those moments came at a veterans’ home.

As she was handing out gratitude cards, she said to a veteran: “I have a little thank you for you, but I didn’t want to buy a stamp.

“The guy said, ‘That’s OK.’”

“And I said, ‘So, instead, I got in my car and I drove 2,700 miles.

“The guy looked at me. It just took a minute to gel, and he said, ‘Really?’ I said, ‘Yeah.’”

“It was like slow motion. The smile came, and he said, ‘Well, isn’t that something.’ ”

Then she told the vet: “This thank you isn’t just from me. It’s from millions of Americans. I’m the emissary. I’m the one who gets the honor of coming here and bringing the message.”

Another time, she encountered a group of uniformed soldiers on a metro train in Washington D.C.

She wasn’t sure what kind of reception she would get, but she approached one and said: “Sir, today I’m going to make your day.”

Then, she handed him a card, with a heart stuck inside.

She told him: “I’m on a 5,000-mile gratitude journey, I just want to tell you thank you.”

Then, she gave out cards and hearts to the other soldiers.

“This one guy said to me, ‘Thank you for doing that.’”

“I got off the train and I just wanted to go, ‘Yes!’ ”

“It was such a high. It was like, ‘Wow, this is what I came for.’ ”

During her trip, she also encountered an element of danger.

Torrential rainfall near Saint Louis forced her to change her itinerary, and the threat of tornados caused her to cut her trip short.

Gavros understands some people may wonder what would compel her to make her Gratitude Journey.

“I believe in the power of one. Every single person has the God-given gift to make a difference. I am a perfect example of that. I have no money, no resources, and yet I am able to do what I do.”

She believes it is her duty to do what she can.

“What is your obligation? What is it that you want to do that makes America better?”

“Our country is in perilous times. We are in such a state of apathy. It’s unbelievable how narcissistic and self-absorbed we are.

“Whatever your gift is — it doesn’t matter what your gift is — do something.”

If you would like to know more about Pat Gavros or her Gratitude Journey, visit PatGavros.com.

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