

# Billberg honored with American Legion Teacher of the Year Award



Vermillion High School social studies teacher Lenni Billberg receives an American Legion Teacher of the Year Award from Clint Meadows, adjutant of the legion in Vermillion, during the Veterans Day program at W.H. Over Museum Monday.

(Photos by David Lias/Plain Talk)

**By Travis Gulbrandson**  
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A Vermillion High School social studies teacher was among the honorees at the 2012 Veterans Day Program at the W.H. Over Museum Monday.

Although Lenni Billberg never served her county in the armed forces, she was presented with the American Legion Teacher of the Year Award for a project she started in 2008 that encourages local students to interact with veterans.

"Students had to do the following: They had to find, interview and write ... a pictorial

biography of a veteran in our community," Billberg said. "They could find somebody that was a relative, a friend, a neighbor who had served at some point in their life, whether it was in a war or whether they were still serving today."

The Veterans Project has since become Billberg's favorite project.

"They're due Dec. 20, so truly, my Christmas present to myself is to take them home and read them each Christmas break," she said. "As I read these stories, each year I get a wonderful (piece) of history about you guys, about you men and women who have served for us."

The stories he ranged from one about a young soldier who was injured in Korea and rescued by a family, to another about a young female codebreaker who recounted D-Day as the day when the air went silent, to a story of a Marine who arrived at his barracks shortly after the 1983 bombing Lebanon.

"All of these stories each and every year make me wonder how you guys did it, how you dared to put on that uniform," Billberg said. "But the question for me when I was given this award was, 'Why did you do it?'"

Billberg said her grandfather, who served in France during World War II, was her main reason for starting the project.

"Sadly for me, he

passed away in 1995, before I dared to ask him his story," she said. "We knew he was a mine-finder traveling ahead of tanks. We knew he served from December of 1941 to 1946. But he passed away in 1995, that was all we knew, and my family feels the void for not knowing his story. ...

"So, it was my job to tell your story," she said.

The Veterans Project has given some of Billberg's students a chance to do what she was unable to.

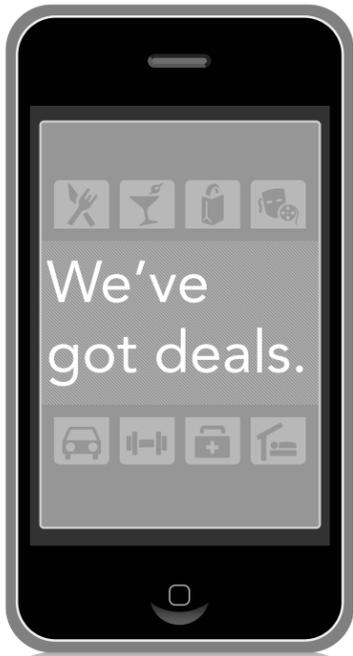
"I had a student two years ago who walked up to me at the end of the school year, six months after his project, who said, 'Ms. Billberg, thank you for making me do the Veterans Project,'" she said. "His grandfather had passed away one week earlier. It was truly an honor for me to say, 'I'm glad you got to know your grandfather.'"

Billberg said it was also an honor to address the assembly of veterans and their families Monday morning.

"So many of you served in local Guard units, so many of you have served just to serve," she said. "You continue to serve because (the people in) this great region of South Dakota ... don't want your 15 minutes of fame. You served because you're laborers of freedom, and unafraid to sacrifice the most to make a difference for us all."



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