

TOP STORY

A gathering of heroes: Area veteran honored by YMCA member

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Council Bluffs YMCA director Leo McIntosh, right, looks on as Rich Kopish, center, presents his stained glass creation, "Hymn for Battle," to Nick Jedlicka on Thursday, Aug. 30, 2018. Jedlicka, who graduated from Thomas Jefferson High School in 1997, joined the Iowa National Guard in 1996 and retired in May of this year as a sergeant major. On April 11, 2011, Jedlicka, serving his second tour in Afghanistan, was severely wounded when a 400-pound destroyed his truck, killing his gunner.

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Retired Council Bluffs pharmacist Dick Miller put together what he called "a gathering of heroes" at the local YMCA.

Leo McIntosh, the YMCA's group vice president for Iowa operations, looked on as Rich Kopish, who retired from the U.S. Geological Survey after 37 years, presented his stained glass creation, "Hymn for Battle," to Nick Jedlicka of Council Bluffs on Thursday.

An Omaha native, Jedlicka moved to Council Bluffs his senior year, graduating from Thomas Jefferson High School in 1997. He joined the Iowa National Guard in October of 1996. He retired in May of this year, having reached the rank of sergeant major.

Deployed twice to Afghanistan, first in 2004 and again in 2010, Jedlicka was severely wounded on April 11, 2011, when a 400-pound improvised explosive device exploded beside his MRAP, an armored truck. The explosion killed Jedlicka's gunner, Council Bluffs native Brent Maher.

Jedlicka was initially treated at an Army hospital in Afghanistan before being transferred to Landstuhl, Germany, and finally to Texas, where he spent a month in the hospital and six months recovering.

Doctors thought they were going to have to remove his foot, but they were able to save it. Correcting the injuries to his mouth and teeth required 101 dental appointments.

Kopish, a Council Bluffs resident whom Miller knew through their memberships at the Council Bluffs Y, told Miller that he was creating a stained glass that he hoped to present to a wounded military veteran. Miller, who also knew Jedlicka through their local Y memberships, suggested the now-retired soldier as a possible recipient.

Kopish liked Miller's suggestion and designed the stained glass panel, which contains 422 pieces and required, he estimated, between 100 and 150 hours to complete, to give to Jedlicka.

But the timeline was interrupted in March when Kopish, playing a little one-on-one basketball at the Y with a friend, suffered a major heart attack.

Miller said Kopish fell to the floor with no pulse and was not breathing. McIntosh used the Y's automatic electronic defibrillator to shock Kopish, who then began breathing.

Kopish has since recovered from his brush with death, continues his stained glass hobby and still plays basketball at the Y. Jedlicka, once threatened with the loss of his foot, ran a half-marathon following his recovery and returned to Council Bluffs, where he now resides. McIntosh, for his part, feels fortunate that he was able to help.