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A KINGS PARK WELCOME: Adopting the Coast Guard / Community wants to be stations home away from home: [SMITHTOWN Edition]

THERESA VARGAS. STAFF WRITER. Newsday, Combined editions; Long Island, N.Y. [Long Island, N.Y.]21 Mar 2004: G36.

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"Kings Park wants to become the place the Coast Guard thinks of as home," said Leo Polaski of Northport, an English professor at Stony Brook University and a trustee of the Kings Park Heritage Museum .

The museum, which is maintained by volunteers in a Kings Park School District building, and the Kings Park Chamber of Commerce, have decided to adopt the station. This will mean inviting the men and women there to community events, sending them gift packages, theater tickets, dinner certificates, seeing to their spouses and children's needs.

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The long, isolated drive spotted with houses but not much else, doesn't quite lead to Kings Park.

Instead, Asharoken Avenue, the road that separates the Coast Guard Station in Eatons Neck from the rest of the Island and any semblance of a

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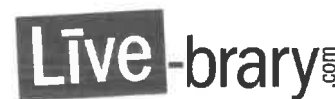
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downtown, ends in Northport.

But if Northport is the station's geographical parents, Kings Park wants to become its adoptive ones.

"Kings Park wants to become the place the Coast Guard thinks of as home," said Leo Polaski of Northport, an English professor at Stony Brook University and a trustee of the Kings Park Heritage Museum.

The museum, which is maintained by volunteers in a Kings Park School District building, and the Kings Park Chamber of Commerce, have decided to adopt the station. This will mean inviting the men and women there to community events, sending them gift packages, theater tickets, dinner certificates, seeing to their spouses and children's needs.

'Good neighbors'

"Just like we're sending packages to Iraq by the zillions, guess what, we looked around and said there are some people here a little deprived," said the museum's director, Leo Ostebo of Kings Park. "This is just what good neighbors do."

With most of the men and women at the station in their early 20s, some far from home, he said, the adoption aims to make them feel less isolated. The closest store is about a 30-minute drive, and forget about finding a local bar, he said.

"Maybe it's not the outpost of Afghanistan, but a young wife from Oregon, away from home, not knowing any human being here, I think that's a difficult thing," said Ostebo, whose son is a Coast Guard captain. "This is like being in a foreign country."

While the station aims to create its own community, Eatons Neck can be a culture shock to some of the newly enlisted members, said operations petty officer Brian Parkerson. This is especially true for those expecting the New York assignments to include skyscrapers and traffic.

"It can be an adjustment period," Parkerson said, adding that while the station does receive some attention from the local community, "Some people don't even know we're here."

The effort by Kings Park is definitely welcomed, he said.

"It shows the community is there for the personnel," Parkerson said. "It's definitely appreciated. ... We welcome anybody who wants to support their local Coast Guard. We definitely have open arms for that."

About 43 people are assigned to the station, 17 of whom are married. Most the men and women are enlisted members, with the exception of one officer.



Richard Bassin, 25, of New Jersey, has been at the station for five months. Just the other night he attended a dinner in Kings Park with five other guard members.

"They definitely made us feel welcomed," the petty officer said. "It's good to know someone appreciates you're out here helping them."

"Sometimes we're overlooked," Bassin added. "I wouldn't say forgotten."

A history with station

Kings Park school district, which boasts of sending 120- plus graduates to military academies in the last 25 years, has a long history with the station. The fifth-graders take a field trip there annually.

"They love it," schools superintendent Mary De Rose said. "It's not something kids normally learn about. Prior to [the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001], I don't think people knew how important they are.... We're on an island here, so you should know what the Coast Guard does for you."

Unfortunately, the Eatons Neck crew only catches the community's eye with the occasional distressed boat, Polaski said. The station answers between 400 and 500 search-and-rescue cases a year, according to its Web site.

As the keepers of Kings Park's history, Polaski and Ostebo said they also could not ignore the significance of the station and its role locally. The main building dates to the 1850s, Polaski said, and the light house is only the second to be built on Long Island.

"Everyone coming into Northport Harbor looks for that light," Polaski said, adding the adoption is only fitting. "It's our military base. We've been doing this for guys thousands of miles away, which we should do, but this is our military base."

Illustration

Caption: Newsday Photo, 1997 / Don Jacobsen - EATONS NECK COAST GUARD STATION, with a 2) Newsday Photo, 1997 / Dave L. Pokress - cutter at the dock, below, is closer to Northport. But Kings Park wants to be a good neighbor to those stationed at the isolated outpost. The chamber of commerce and local museum decided to adopt the station.

Word count: 802

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