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Old Glory gets fitting retirement thanks to volunteers' efforts

*James Knox*

Denise Etter with www.retireyouroldglory.com checks the retirement bin filled with flags Wednesday June 12, 2013 inside the Cranberry Municipal Center.

By [Bill Zlatos](#)

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As America celebrates Flag Day on Friday, some residents are collecting flags too torn, tattered and faded to fly proudly.

"It's certainly very patriotic to have the flag retired properly," said Ron Sarrick, buildings, grounds and sustainability administrator for Upper St. Clair. "It's something we all owe to those who fought for freedom for us, to do this in their honor."

Sarrick helps maintain one of the seven sites in Western Pennsylvania managed by the Retire Your Unserviceable Old Glory project founded by Denise Etter of Cranberry.

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Flag Day ceremonies

Since May 2011, the campaign has collected about 3,300 flags in Cranberry, Upper St. Clair, Green Tree, Crafton, the city of Erie and Fairview and Millcreek townships in Erie County.

Etter started the project when she and her husband, Daniel, who served as an Army scout in Bosnia, saw some flags flying that needed to be retired.

"The flag, when it is in such condition that it is no longer a fitting emblem for display, should be destroyed in a dignified way, preferably by burning," according to the U.S. Flag Code.

The project provides a convenient place to drop off old flags, which are then given to the Boy or Girl Scouts of America, Veterans of Foreign Wars or American Legion for a retirement ceremony.

The bin in Cranberry teemed with about 70 flags Wednesday, and residents have dropped off 2,280 flags there in the past two years. Threads dangled from some. On one flag, the red stripes had faded to orange, the bright white color had yellowed and the blue was washed out. Others appeared brand new.

The flags were as small as the 4-by-6-inch versions flags stuck in lawns or as big as the 18-by-9-foot flags anchored to mounts on the fronts of homes and buildings. A few had just 48 stars, from before Alaska and Hawaii became states in 1959.

Some people donated Pennsylvania, Canadian or Marine Corps flags.

"I flew it every day with the American flag," Schuster said of the Marine Corps flag he donated to honor sons Joseph and Gregory, who are Marines. Etter has also collected a POW-MIA flag, which was mostly black and featured a silhouette of a man, head bowed, with a guard tower and strand of barbed wire in the background.

Mark Schuster, founder of the Crafton Memorial Committee, sponsors the bin at the Crafton Public Library. He founded the memorial committee in 2004 to honor the 98 men and women from Crafton who died in service to their country, the earliest in 1917 during World War I.

Having completed that project, the committee turned its attention to helping dispose of old flags and collected 22 in the first three weeks.

"Most people just view it as cloth or material," Schuster said. "Looking at it through the eyes of veterans who served, working with them on this memorial committee, it gives me a much deeper appreciation of what that the flag means to these veterans. They look at it completely different because they lost their friends and classmates."

Etter said flag donors seem motivated by the desire to do the right thing. She cited a woman who dropped off three flags from a building that was going to be torn down.

"She was afraid the demolition crew would throw them away with the rest of the building material," Etter said.

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- Soldiers & Sailors Memorial Hall and Museum in Oakland will host the 85th annual Flag Day Ceremony at 10 a.m. on Saturday with the Daughters of the American Revolution and the Sons of the American Revolution. The event will take place in the hall's auditorium.

- American Legion Post 823 will host Pause for the Pledge at 6:45 p.m. on Friday at the Veterans Memorial at 825 Poplar St. in Green Tree.