

31 years of history with the USO at Midway Airport

by Annette Dixon

Donna Vickroy, retired writer for Southtown Economist, was first to cover the news in 1991, about a development for a USO at Midway Airport in Chicago, Illinois. The story was about Annette Dixon's excursion on an afternoon in downtown Chicago. There was an attack on the Island of Grenada and the United States thought we were in war, so the streets were empty, with no cars or pedestrians, but Annette was there and scared. The only thought that entered her mind was "what will happen to her daughter who was in the Navy. She knew that women could not fight on the front nor be in a submarine, so she knew she was safe, but worried about all the men in the military."

Therefore, Annette searched for the Downtown USO, which was open, she approached Retired Lt.

Ralph Eldridge with the idea of having a facility of a USO at Midway Airport, for all the military passing through Midway Airport. He agreed with her and requested she get petitions and further the cause by presenting them to the Mayor's Office. She went home compiled a sample of a document stating the request for a USO at Midway Airport and proceeded with 25 spaces for signatures and 25 copies to give to the members attending a meeting that evening. Her request was for each person to make additional copies and to have the full amount delivered to her home within the week. Within four weeks and over 100,000 signatures, the Alderman and Mayor Richard Daley voted for the USO to be a tenant within the airport. It was a scary time, but that war lasted three days. Annette did not know at the time how successful this project would

become, but the timing was within her realm since it was during the time of Desert Storm and Gulf War. Later, the Persian Gulf War became a reality and many military personnel passed through Midway, mainly the Navy because of their base in Great Lakes.

Now that the USO became a tenant in the airport, they needed to build a facility that would be big enough to accommodate the needs of Military Families, also traveling. So, Annette took over and contacted VFW Johnson Phelps 5220 in Oak Lawn back in the fall of 1991. They in turn connected her to the Post Commander Jerry Bogaczyk who was a Vietnam Veteran. The membership conducted fundraising drives for the intention of a fully equipped kitchen and dining areas of the new Midway Airport USO Center. They raised enough to purchase the wall and base cabinets, tables, chairs, counters, and electrical appliances. Three retired carpenters donated their skills and time to do the necessary installation work. A new tile floor was also purchased and installed by the Oak Lawn Post 5220, located near the entrance of Terminal B.

The United Service Organization, USO was finished and located in the main terminal of Midway Airport. It was Annette Dixon that operated the USO with the help of

financing from Amvets, American Legion Posts, VFW Posts and USO Headquarters, since USO, is a private non-for-profit organization which relies entirely on donations and volunteers.

On May 31, 1992, the USO Center formally opened, per article in the Southtown Economist, written by Cornelia Grumman. "That was the kind of service Oak Lawn resident Annette Dixon had in mind when she proposed offering a USO center at Midway Airport during the height of the Desert Storm and Persian Gulf War. On June 6, 1992, Midway USO center held an open house to coincide with the airport's three-day commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the Battle of Midway during World War II. The center has a director, Marcia Warda, and a staff of two, Dorothy Krzysiak and Annette Dixon. A three-room area with a large screen television set and videocassette recorder, magazines, books and free coffee, hot dogs, and soda; a children's room equipped with crib and a kitchen. "This was one of the nicest, cleanliest airport USO's I have seen in my 18 years of military service," wrote Ted Warywoda, a Washington, D.C. base serviceman, in the center's comment book."

Ten years later, 2002, Rick Techman, writer of Village View Publications, Clearing and Garfield Ridge edition, "More than 100 armed U.S. Army military police patrol the Midway Airport terminal and sensitive buildings on the airport grounds alongside Chicago Police Officers and private airport security personnel to prevent breaches of air travel safety here since the September 11 tragedies. Now the USO moved, and renovation took place in the airport."

The history of the Midway USO has been established 29 years ago and currently with the coronavirus, I am sure recommended safety prevails with the City's guideline.

The history of the USO was first chartered by the United States Congress in 1941 as a not-for-profit

charitable corporation and received no direct funding from any level of government.

In Illinois, April 1942, was the first USO constructed at the Central Railroad Station on Roosevelt and Michigan in Chicago, then in May 1942, they were moved to 313 S. Wabash. They closed their doors after World War II in Illinois and started up again in July 1948 during the Korean War. The first one was in O'Hare Airport 1969; Great Lakes Naval Base, 1985; USO Midway Airport, August 21, 1991, Navy Pier, 2002; Second USO at O'Hare Airport Terminal 3, in 2010, and lastly Rock Island Arsenal, Moline, 2011.

At the USO Midway, there has been several moves or teardowns. Terry Lemke the Director stated that more than 2800 military people have passed through the current location monthly. If you can help with your donation to the USO Midway Airport to support our Military Personnel, it will be greatly appreciated. For more information about Midway Airport USO, contact Terry Lemke at 312-208-6075 from 9:00 am to 5:00 pm.



VA national cemeteries to commemorate Memorial Day

The U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs' (VA) National Cemetery Administration (NCA) announced that it will commemorate Memorial Day this year with solemn wreath laying ceremonies.

Another offering is a new online memorial feature allowing the public to pay tribute to Veterans interred in VA national cemeteries across the country.

Effective immediately: Visitors should use the CDC's community-level guidance for the county in which a VA national cemetery is located to determine masking requirements for indoor spaces.

Other public events typically associated with Memorial Day at national cemeteries, including group placement of flags at gravesites, will not take place. However, all VA national cemeteries will be open Memorial Day weekend from dawn to dusk for public visitation.

Cemetery visitors are asked to adhere to health and safety guidelines and maintain physical distancing while visiting. Visitors are also urged to consider visiting Friday, Saturday, or Sunday to avoid possible crowds on Memorial Day. Families may continue the tradition of placing flowers and small American flags at their Veteran's gravesite.

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708-425-1910

Fax: 708-221-6663

vvnew@sbcglobal.net

www.vvnew.com

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