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Last salute: Miller's Vets dedicate burial ground

By **KEVIN ALLEN**
Tribune Staff Writer

SOUTH BEND - Retired Judge Robert L. Miller Sr. was inspired two years ago to start an organization for homeless veterans to help them live with the dignity they deserve after serving in the military.

On Saturday morning, more than 100 people recognized another of Miller's successes that will ensure indigent veterans are treated with dignity when their lives end.



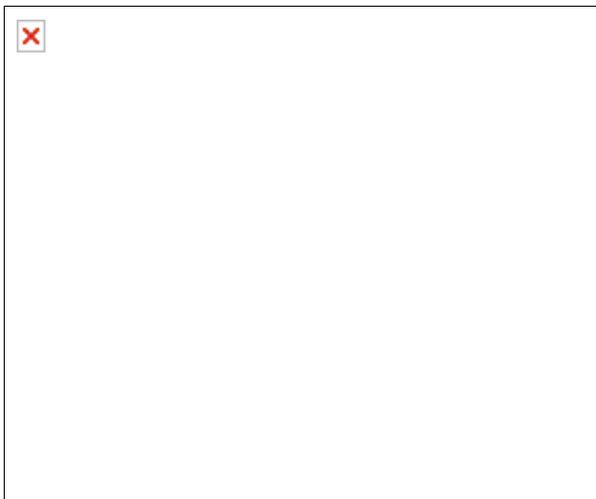
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Members of Miller's Vets line up in formation Saturday morning for the dedication of the Garden of Peace, a section of 65 burial plots in the cemetery behind Portage Manor.

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The audience gathered in freezing weather under an ash-colored sky to dedicate the Miller's Vets Garden of Peace, a section of 65 plots in the cemetery behind Portage Manor that will be a final resting place for veterans who otherwise would not be given proper burials after they die.



The crowd's mood was a mix of solemnity and excitement as a monumental archway of brick, concrete and stainless steel was unveiled at the garden's entrance, revealing bronze sculptures of a lion lying with a lamb - the Miller's Vet's logo - and a bust of the judge raising his right hand in a salute.

Miller, an 89-year-old veteran of the U.S. Naval Reserves who served in World War II and the Korean War, and later became a St. Joseph Superior Court judge, said the garden is "a down payment" on what all Americans owe those who have fought for the nation's freedom.

"When you see a veteran, if he's doing well, thank him," Miller said. "If he's not, you owe him."

Miller's Vets is a division of the Center for the Homeless. The judge said more than 20 homeless veterans have participated in the organization's drill team that marches at parades, ceremonies and other events.

This latest aspect of the organization is called the Last Salute, as it provides complete funeral services with all military honors and grave markers to indigent veterans of the county.

Steve Camilleri, executive director of the center, said Miller's organization has helped homeless veterans transform their lives with a sense of belonging and relationships with each other.

"It is certainly wonderful to watch them march and see how good they look," Camilleri said, "but it's what's happening on the inside that makes all the difference."

Danny Forrest, the platoon leader that led the drill team at the dedication ceremony, is one of those who have been transformed through Miller's Vets.

Forrest, an Army veteran who served two tours in Panama, landed on his feet after being honorably discharged from the military. He found employment and bought a house.

But a series of hardships - he lost his job, his savings and his home, and then his brother was murdered - threw him into homelessness and despair.

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Forrest ended up sleeping under the Colfax Avenue bridge for two years, praying each night that he would die.

Finally, he went to the Center for the Homeless in December 2008 and joined Miller's Vets. Nearly two years later, he is sober, in the process of moving out of the center and will start a full-time job in a few days.

Miller said Forrest's story has a happy ending: He will not qualify for burial in the Garden of Peace because he is no longer indigent. The garden is for those veterans who, unlike Forrest, don't recover.

"Miller's Vets saved my life," Forrest said after the ceremony. "I didn't feel the pain of those losses any more. He gave me the opportunity to get Danny back, and I'm grateful for that."

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