



Citrus stands up for POW

Nugent commends residents for supporting captured soldier

By Nancy Kennedy

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INVERNESS — The color of the day was yellow as a crowd of about 100 people gathered in the parking lot of Time Square Plaza just outside Inverness on Monday to send Washington, D.C., and the nation the message: “Bring Bowe home.”



Matthew Beck

U.S. Rep. Richard Nugent, R-Brooksville, addresses a group of about 100 people Monday morning in Inverness following the delivery of some 8,000 petition signatures. The signatures are on a letter addressed to Secretary of State John Kerry encouraging the negotiation for the release of American prisoner of war Army Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl. The soldier is being held captive in Afghanistan.

With a backdrop of yellow ribbons on local storefront businesses' doors and the song “Tie A Yellow Ribbon Round the Ol' Oak Tree” playing, U.S. Rep. Richard Nugent, R-Brooksville, was presented with nearly 8,000 petition signatures on a letter addressed to Secretary of State John Kerry, urging him to do whatever he can to bring home Army Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl, the only living American POW.

Bergdahl, 27, was reported missing June 30, 2009, while on duty in Afghanistan. Since then, the Taliban has released videos showing him in captivity.

In December 2011, he was reported to have escaped his captors, but was recaptured three days later. Until recently, the Taliban had shown interest in possible negotiations.

A committee of about 30 people, spearheaded by Air Force veteran and Rolling Thunder member Cynthia Holden, plus many more volunteers from local veterans' organizations, have been working tirelessly since last fall to collect Citrus County residents' signatures, with the goal of delivering them to Nugent, who would in turn bring them back to Washington.

Under rain-threatening gray skies, Holden told the crowd, “The mission statement of Rolling Thunder is ‘POW/MIA awareness,’ so it's fitting for us to be involved in bringing Bowe home ... People ask, ‘Do I know him?’ No, but he could be ours, and as far as I'm concerned, he is ours. ... What we're trying to do is bring awareness that it's not satisfactory that anybody is left behind.”

In light of the recent news from the Taliban that they have suspended mediation with the U.S. to exchange Bergdahl for five senior Taliban prisoners held in custody in Guantanamo Bay, Holden said it only emboldens local grassroots efforts to keep his name in the minds of our nation's leaders and citizens.

“We need the government to know that we care, and we're going to keep the awareness going until Bowe's brought home,” she said.

Nugent echoed that sentiment, saying it's “absolutely amazing” that people in Citrus County are so passionate about a soldier who isn't even from the area. Bergdahl is from Hailey, Idaho.

“Last year, on the fourth anniversary of Sgt. Bergdahl's capture, on the floor of the House of Representatives, I introduced a resolution in the House calling on the United States to do everything possible not to leave any members of the armed forces behind during the drawdown of Iraq and Afghanistan. Believe it or not, I had members of Congress come up to me and say, ‘I didn't know we had a living POW in Afghanistan.’ That was shocking to me,” he said.

Nugent spoke about his own three sons who are serving in the military and about the wounded warriors he has met in military hospitals, noting that their primary concern is about their comrades and how it's of the highest importance to not leave a buddy behind.

Regarding the nearly 8,000 signatures on stacks of letters that were all tied up with yellow ribbons, Nugent said he's been asked repeatedly if it will make a difference.

“I have faith that it will,” he said. “But unless the American people continue to put pressure on Washington, the cries of his family will continue to go unheard.”

He added, “I would want that if it was my son held in captivity, and that's what you would want, too.”

Nugent said that although he couldn't guarantee the secretary of state would or could do anything, he could guarantee that he would do his best to “make your voices heard.”

Contact Chronicle reporter Nancy Kennedy at 352-564-2927 or nkennedy@chronicleonline.com.

HOW TO HELP

* For information about the Bring Bowe Home project and how you can help, email Cynthia Holden at Cyn2719@yahoo.com.