

Staten Island's Memorial Day Parade: A showcase for patriotism

By Ben Johnson

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STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. --- Cookouts are nice, but spectators and service personnel at Staten Island's 91st annual Memorial Day Parade yesterday preferred to savor the holiday by honoring those who served their country.

While cheerleaders stretched their limbs for handsprings, small boys righted their canteens and uncased their trumpets along Forest Avenue, and members of the local chapter of Rolling Thunder motorcycle club kept their

engines sputtering near the route's starting point at Clove Road in West Brighton.

Grand Marshal Michael (Mikey) Giaquinto, a resident of Bay Terrace and a retired Army sergeant who served as a combat medic in Operation Desert Storm, said she hoped the day's festivities would showcase the patriotism of both marchers and spectators.

"Freedom starts with an idea," said Ms. Giaquinto. "It's protected by men and women in uniform, and it's kept alive by the veterans. Even though modern warfare presents us with new challenges, like more post-traumatic stress disorder and missing limbs, every veteran can relate to one another, no matter what their service."

Elected officials, who were out in full force, echoed Ms. Giaquinto's sentiment.

Rep. Michael McMahon said the Island's parade had "great spirit," and the event "pays tribute to those who gave the last and final measure to their country." Assemblyman Michael Cusick said recognizing the armed services should define the holiday.

"It's not about beaches and barbecues, it's about men and women who put themselves in harm's way for this country," said Cusick. "It's important that all citizens young and old understand the meaning of today."

Some Islanders also wanted to know the meaning of the parade route's truncated status -- a total cut of 1.5 miles. The march stepped off from Salem Evangelical Free Church, 634 Clove Rd., West Brighton and worked its way down Forest Avenue to the Forest Avenue Shoppers Town, excluding a stretch of West Brighton businesses that have long offered a gathering spot for supporters. Marianna Ciardiello, of West Brighton, whose small dog Bullet sported an American flag sweater, said the change was disrespectful to veterans.

"It's a sad state of affairs," complained Ms. Ciardiello, who said her brothers had been active in the military in Vietnam and the Persian Gulf. "I'm sure they'll say there's no money, but the government has money to throw themselves parties. It's not right."

Not far away, Borough President James Molinaro was beginning to march. He said the event's downswing was a result of city-wide cuts, stipulating that all of the day's parades be cut 25 percent.

"As you see, it's still well-attended down here," said Molinaro, who waved a small American flag. He was interrupted by a spectator who yelled: "Mr. Borough President, give us back our parade! Put it back to where it was!"

Molinaro -- who heard similar messages from several vocal Islanders along the route -- said he agreed with them, and wondered why the route hadn't ended at Clove Lakes Park, rather than starting there. Radio talk-show host Curtis Sliwa, the founder of the Guardian Angles who marched in the parade as well, voiced his frustrations more vocally.

"How does Staten Island get cheated?" asked Sliwa. "Staten Island has more veterans per capita than any other borough. These elected officials better wake up. Maybe they should be marching after the mounties, with a pooper-scooper."

Many others seemed content to set up along the route and watch, cheering on the Boy Scouts and various high school marching bands, and giving shouts of "Thank you for all you do" to veterans and active duty service personnel from each branch of the military.

The spirit seemed alive in Stan Collora, 70, a Westerleigh resident on the sidelines who wore a blue navy cap from the U.S.S. Independence, and a T-shirt from last year's parade.

"We come here every year, to remember all those men that gave everything for us to have these parades," said Collora, who served as a "swabby" in the Navy from 1958 to 1962. "We can't take too much for granted."