Written by Nancy Spencer Monday, October 01, 2012 8:49 AM - Last Updated Thursday, February 28, 2013 11:27 AM

DELPHOS — A handful of his family gathered at the Delphos Veterans Memorial Friday afternoon to lay a special paver for their fallen soldier

ENC(SW) John Keith Bemis would have been 31 years old on Friday. He died Aug. 7 at his residence in San Diego, Calif. A Mass was also held Friday at St. John the Evangelist Catholic Church celebrating his life.



Friday afternoon, his parents, Sue and Tony Bemis; his oldest sister, Allison; and grandparents, Donald and Naomi Bemis of Versailles; watched as a permanent reminder of Keith's service to his country was laid.

His sisters, Christy and Fran, also in the Navy and stationed overseas, and his brother, Ted, a chemical engineer in Florence, S.C., were unable to attend.

The laying of the paver was just one of many instances of support from the community, according to Sue Bemis.

"The support we have felt has been overwhelming," Sue Bemis said. "We aren't originally from

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Delphos so it was very comforting when the community gathered around us. Nothing kills the pain but it's so helpful to have the support of so many. People are profoundly uncomfortable with someone in mourning but Delphos has helped us so much."

Delphos and the surrounding area physically came to the Bemis' aid when their son died. Keith's name appeared on a group's web site that protests and pickets soldier's funerals. Supporters quickly united and surrounded St. John's Church during the funeral, putting a barrier between the family and whomever might show up.

"Keith would have loved all the motorcycles and the escort to the cemetery," Sue said. The oldest Bemis child joined the Navy in 1999 and when he finished his senior year at St. John's High School in 2000, he was off to the service.

"Keith was the first in our family to go in the service," Sue said. "I was OK with it, my husband was OK with it but my mother was worried. When he joined, there were more problems domestically than overseas and there was a lower casualty rate in the Navy, better pay, better food and he knew he would be living on the coast somewhere. For someone who lived his whole life in Ohio, that was attractive. He wanted to travel."

Keith was also looking for money for college.

"He was the oldest of five children so money was tight and he knew it would be a struggle," his mother remembered.

He began his Navy career aboard the USS Lake Champlain and provided support to ground troops during the first campaign in Afghanistan. He was Sailor of the Month in February 2004 for his efforts in preventing a fire that could have destroyed the ship. He served as a recruiter for the Navy in west Texas where he was the top recruiter. Recently, he served as an engineer aboard the USS Independence and was awarded the Navy and Marine Corps Achievement Medal for Navigation in the Panama Canal.

All the while, he earned an associate degree in criminal justice and marketing from San Diego State University and was working toward his bachelor's degree.

Keith's service aboard the USS Independence was classified and his presence there was requested.

"Keith was on board with a group of mature guys," Sue said. "The crew was hand-picked for their skills. They are all seasoned veterans."

A mother feeling the loss of one gone too soon still remembers her little boy.

"He was such an easy kid. He was the only child and the only grandchild for a while. He wasn't spoiled but he got a lot of attention," she said. "His grandparents thought he was wonderful." He was also all boy, his mother remembers.

"Until he was 5, his favorite pastime was jumping off the refrigerator," she said. "He only stopped then because he couldn't wedge himself between it and the ceiling anymore."

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