

Faribault Elks Lodge honors fallen Janesville soldier

By **KELSEY HERING**

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The color black is defined as lacking brightness or enveloped in darkness.

Darkness is what his family felt the day they got the call.

Black is the color his friends, family and members of his platoon wore to his funeral. And while it may define the hurt, it isn't the color that defines the strength, discipline and determination that one Janesville man had when he sacrificed his life for his country.



Fasnacht

Nine years after his 2005 death, the Faribault Elks on Saturday honored Michael J. Fasnacht's service and presented his parents Marnie and Ray, with the Elks' Medal of Valor, which honors vets who have served in either the Iraq or Afghanistan conflicts. Faribault's Elks Lodge is the first in the state to hold such a ceremony and to present the honor to a fallen soldier.

Virginia Van Sluis, Faribault Elks' chaplain and veterans committee chair, said the Elks established the honor within the last year and chose to honor Fasnacht after hearing about his leadership and determination in the military. Van Sluis says the group wanted to honor a fallen soldier from southern Minnesota and they were pleased to present Fasnacht's parents with the award.

"It's so important to our organization to be able to honor all vets, especially the



Ray and Marnie Fasnacht, right, were presented with the Medal of Valor on their son's behalf by members of the Faribault Elks Lodge No. 1166. (Kelsey Hering/Waseca County News)

soldiers who have lost their lives fighting for our country," said Van Sluis.

Growing up, Fasnacht attended the Janesville-Waldorf-Pemberton School District. He was the fourth of seven children and his parents say he always held on to his dream of being in the military.

"He wanted to be out there actively fighting terrorism," said Marnie Fasnacht.

He joined the military in 2000 after completing basic training and ROTC in college at Minnesota State University, Mankato.

Fasnacht was soon named an Army 1st lieutenant and chose to lead a platoon when he was deployed to Iraq. He was the only one in his platoon that didn't make it home.

It was June 2005 when Fasnacht was

leading his platoon in a Bradley Fighting Vehicle when an improvised explosive device went off and everything went black.

His parents were in shock.

"It didn't seem real until we saw his body," said Marnie, "but it also brought us closure to know that he had gone to heaven."

Prior to Fasnacht's funeral, Marnie and Ray got the chance to speak with members of their son's platoon.

"The guys in his platoon told me that unlike most platoon leaders, Mike always led from the front. He put himself in a vulnerable position to keep everyone else safe," Marnie said.

Marnie said that meeting the men that served with her son helped remind her of the strength of all men and women who

serve our country.

"It was really nice to meet others that were in his platoon. They are all very strong, patriotic and generous people and I couldn't say enough nice things about them," she said.

The funeral was held in Mankato, and vets from Janesville, Waseca and the surrounding communities lined the streets to honor Fasnacht. The Janesville Fire Department also had a flag on display on the processional route. Marnie said the family was moved by the support they received from surrounding communities.

While Marnie and Ray still grieve the loss of their son, being at Saturday's ceremony helped his family remember the value of his sacrifice.

"It's a great thing, and I think we need to give all of our veterans the loyalty and honor they deserve. They put their lives on the line just like Mike did," said Marnie.

On Saturday, Fasnacht's family and friends used the colors red, white and blue to define their brave, fallen soldier.

To Fasnacht's parents, their son's memory will always beat steady in their hearts. And although he isn't with her now, Marnie Fasnacht is sure she'll see her son again one day. And that brings her some semblance of peace.

"I will see him again," she said, looking toward the sky. "If you don't have faith, a situation like this is impossible to deal with."

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