

Keeping meaning at Schuyler Avenue

By Celeste Regal

If you go to the corner of Schuyler and Bergen Avenue where the enclosed redevelopment grounds are leveled except for a flagpole, look closely and you will find the significance of it being the last remaining artifact of a bygone era.

On the concrete base there is a beautifully patinated brass plaque that was cast with the names of men who lost their lives during WWII. It was created when the site belonged to the Navy and was called Pollak Manufacturing Company. The memorial honors their employees who died overseas.

Look even closer at the seventh entree on the left side column. You will see the name Eugene Hallenbeck. He was a Kearny resident and his brother John took a stand for its continued existence.

Because of John Hallenbeck's quick action, Ed Russo, owner of Russo Development, will save the plaque for display.

"During demolition of the existing building, we were careful to preserve the existing WWII memorial on the northwest corner of the property," Russo said. "This important monument will be prominently placed in a landscaped area at the entrance to the property following completion of our redevelopment project."

Around three months ago, when Hollenbeck, 71, read a story in The Observer when the Town of Kearny first resolved to allow Russo to demolish the old Silver and Gold warehouse, he went down to the Town Hall annex where the Construction Code Enforcement department is to "ask some questions about it."

Construction Board of Appeals Secretary Christine acknowledged that Hallenbeck came to her when he heard about the building being demolished to inquire if there was something that could be done to preserve it.

"There are 28 names on the plaque of all the men who were killed in action and my brother's name is on it," Hallenbeck said. "So I wanted to know before anybody knocked it down, or took it away or did anything with it."

He talked to Nee and told her the story about the plaque and asked her to give it to him or he could give it to the Kearny VFW (Wilson Gugleman Post 1302 on Belgrove Drive.)

"I made a few phone calls and got in touch with the in house attorney for Russo development," Nee said.



IN MEMORY OF – A memorial plaque that Pollak Manufacturing Company had made for employees who lost their lives in WWII is being preserved by Russo Development at the Schuyler Crossing site.

The attorney said would take the ball from there and make sure that nothing happened to it.

"That's exactly what they did. They protected it during the demolition but they have yet applied to the board for any type of construction permit. I felt for this man and was happy to help him," she said.

Russo was happy to help Hallensbeck and someone called to let him know about it.

"A woman called (from Russo) and guaranteed me that nothing would happen to the plaque, it wouldn't disappear and wouldn't be destroyed but she said, 'I can't give it to you because it's privately owned – when we brought the property, we brought the plaque,'" he said. "She turned around and there it is. They've got it roped off so nobody can touch it."

Hallenbeck said that people have been commenting on the flagpole still standing but he said they don't really know why it's there.

"I want to thank Russo Development because they kept their word. I can't believe that I'm the only one in Kearny that had a brother killed in WWII that worked there. Nobody else has gone down there to claim this thing or say anything about it," he said. "I tried taking a picture myself but it's so hard because of the fence and there were still bushes in front of it at the time."

Of course, one of the perks of being a reporter is that you usually have access to these places, especially if you've written a favorable story about them (See the cover story of the Jan. 14 issue of The Observer.) I called Selena Quintal, Russo Director of Marketing, and we went down to the site where Schuyler and Bergen Avenue meet on the morning of Feb. 18 and took quite a few photos of the historic plaque. The detail and legibility are outstanding, especially since it was cast on a curve to fit the base of the flagpole.

Nee said she hopes that Russo re-dedicates the plaque in some way when they construction of the retail units in progress is completed.

"That would be nice," she said. "When I saw the yellow caution tape around the monument, I was really happy – it was a sweet thing."