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Major General Leslie Purser, USA, Retired, shows Maury Middle School student Caroline Coates information about the "Grateful Nation Project" that will make research information available to her school. With them is School Board member Doug Ibbetson, who is also spearheading the project.

## PRESERVING FREEDOM

# 'Grateful Nation Project' connects students with local military heroes

By Steve Marion

Staff Writer

U.S. Army Private First Class John W. Watkins had been in Vietnam less than a month when he died in the Battle of Xa Cam on April 11, 1966.

A sharpshooter, the 21-year-old from Jefferson City held his position as his platoon was surrounded and outnumbered. He was posthumously awarded the Bronze Star and Purple Heart.

While Watkins' story is remembered by his family, it is in danger of being forgotten by the public. And while local youngsters grow up studying U.S. history, they may not know how closely connected their own communities are to it.

"That's why this project means so much to us," School Board member Doug Ibbetson said yesterday morning at an announcement gathering for the "Grateful Nation Project," designed to connect students to members of their community who gave their lives to preserve our freedom. "This can be a resource for students in years to come."

The Project will eventually provide packages of "hero cards" about fallen service members to the libraries at each middle school and the high school. The numbered cards lead students to a permanent online narrative they can use for researching a class assignment. Families can help by registering loved ones killed in service. Businesses, individuals, and organizations can pitch in

with donations to help with the costs.

Major General Leslie Purser, USA, Retired, grew interested in bringing the program to Jefferson County after attending a related event in Knoxville, where the program is also underway.

"I saw what they were doing and thought this would get a lot of support here too," she said.

The two talked to Director of Schools Dr. Tommy Arnold, who offered the school system's full support. Yesterday, the group launched the project at a gathering at Maury Middle School. On display were a photograph of Watkins, examples of the "hero cards," and an example of a gift presented to families featuring a photograph of the service

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# GRATEFUL NATION: Project gets underway in local schools

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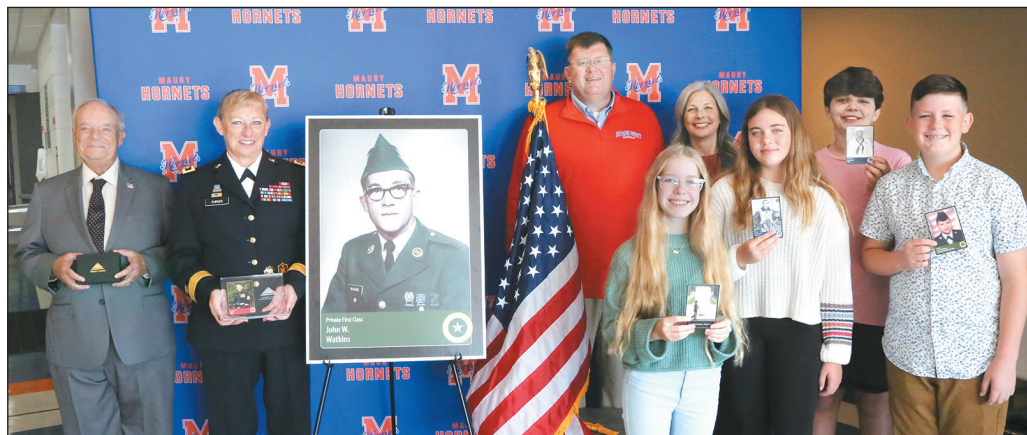
member in a special display.

Interested county residents are encouraged to visit [www.herocards.us](http://www.herocards.us) to register a family member. The Project will include any service man or woman from the Revolutionary War to present who died or was killed while actively serving.

“Our purpose is to make it easy for educators to provide a resource that will lead our next generation to report on and celebrate our legacy of freedom,” Ibbetson said.

Purser said cadets in both the Jefferson County High and Carson-Newman University are assisting with research on the project. So far, three Jefferson County-related hero cards are complete, with more in the works.

• Speaking of remembering veterans, volunteers with Wreaths Across America will be at Food City Dandridge this Saturday raising funds. It costs \$17 for each of the wreaths to be placed on veterans’ headstones at local cemeteries this December 16.



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Local participation in the “Grateful Nation Project” was announced yesterday at an event at Maury Middle. With School Board Member Doug Ibbetson and Major General Leslie Purser, are Director of Schools Dr. Tommy Arnold, Supervisor of Secondary Education and Assessment Michelle Walker, and Maury students Caroline Coates, Evian Waltke, Emery Richards, and Nash Underwood.