

Huels honored after saluting Vietnam vets at NHRA race near St. Louis

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ST. LOUIS – Carl Huels’ late parents, Carl Sr. and Helen, farmed the land and planted values within their son that blossomed into a beautiful family and a successful business.

Along the way, the 62-year-old owner of Carl’s 4WD & Performance Center NAPA AutoCare Center in Bartelso, Ill., and Huel’s NAPA AutoCare tire and service center about nine miles away, clung to other principles common to Midwest farming families.

“My parents taught me there’s no need to ever look for recognition and to always be very humble,” he said.

For that reason, this story would be embarrassing to him were it not for the greater good of sharing his effort to honor nearly 60 Vietnam Veterans who were not greeted with parades and proper medical treatment when they returned home from America’s most unpopular war.

Huel remembers the era of which regardless of some opinions of the war, those who were mostly drafted into service deserved a much better greeting and care.

“I lived through that era,” he said. “I was of draft age near the end of the war when they introduced the “lottery” to more fairly determine who would be drafted. My number was high, in the 300s (out of 365). As I got to think about that over time I realized I could have been one of them whose lives were forever changed.

“They got the short end of the stick when they came home. Over the years I’ve tried to do something special for Vietnam veterans.”

On Saturday (Sept. 23) of the NHRA Midwest Nationals at Gateway Motorsports Park near St. Louis, Huel organized a special day for 58 members of the Vietnam Veterans Association Chapter 269 of Clinton County where his NAPA AutoCare Centers are located.

It took months of planning but the day was flawless and memorable. It started with a meal served near his shop at 1509 Carlyle Road in Bartelso, Ill., and with community donations bus transportation was secured to Gateway, about 50 miles away. NAPA AUTO PARTS provided tickets and caps, and Don Schumacher Racing drivers Tony Schumacher, Jack Beckman and NAPA AUTO PARTS driver Ron Capps visited with the vets.

“I love drag racing and a lot of our Vietnam vets were car guys before they served and either dreamed of getting back home to their muscle cars, or dreamed of getting one when they came home. That helped them get through it.

“I wanted to help do something really special and thanks to NAPA, Gateway Motorsports Park and so many others in our community.

Nearly 10 of the special guests earned Purple Hearts and one received the Silver Star, but Huel didn’t want to single any of them out as they were a group not individuals.

“Five from our county joined the Army and went to boot camp together. They fought together and were in one of the fiercest battles of the war. They were fortunate to come home together and they’re still close friends.

“Those five guys earned Purple Hearts and they were thrilled to meet Tony Schumacher and his U.S. Army dragster team,” Huel said, his eyes beginning to water and his throat growing thick.

“Their wives went over to get pictures of them with Tony, and they cried while they took the pictures. They didn’t want to be in the pictures; they wanted to take them so they could see the looks on their husband’s faces.

“The importance of the day hit me when I was watching the reaction they had when the first Top Fuel car went 300 mph. Along with the excitement, smiles and laughter, I could see youth in their eyes. That was special.”

Very special considering much of their youth had been taken from them.

It would have been hard to top Friday’s experience for Huel, but NAPA tried by presenting him with the NAPA Honorary Crew Member award for his outstanding community service and 39 years of loyalty to NAPA.

He attended Saturday’s racing with Geri, his wife of 38 years, and their oldest of five daughters, Kristi Jones, who was joined by her husband, Jeremy.

After receiving an official NAPA Racing crew shirt that Capps autographed, the Huels enjoyed a chef-prepared lunch before he rode with the NAPA AUTO PARTS team to retrieve Capps and his Funny Car after an early qualifying run.