

Freedom Heritage Museum finds pathway to success with help from USI Public Relations team

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The Freedom Heritage Museum employed a USI public relations team to help shape and launch the image of Evansville's newest World War II museum. Museum President, Dr. Richard Litov, approached USI's Center for Applied Research and Economic Development (CARED) to utilize university resources to make their dream a reality.

CARED looked to communications professor, Mary Beth Reese to lead a public relations team and provide a solid foundation for the museum's success. Reese engaged three public relations students- fall 2013 graduate, Rileigh Head; summer 2013 graduate, Amy Devries; summer 2013 graduate, Paige Popham; and current student, Adam Haskins- to assist her with the project. "They are like a new business. They have a great idea, they have a great concept. But they need to get lined out where they are going," said Reese. The team approached the project with three major goals: refine the concept, define the organization's key messages, and identify the appropriate publics.

During World War II, Evansville became the most productive war materials manufacturing cities in the world per capita. The Freedom Heritage Museum was established provide all generations a glimpse into the role of Evansville's manufacturing support during World War II.



The USI Public Relations Team poses in front of the B-25 at the P-47 Homecoming Event.

"If you look at the stories that journalists are writing right now, they are trying to capture what happened in World War II because most of these veterans are shrinking in numbers. If we don't capture these stories quickly, they will be lost forever," said Reese.

The project surrounded a first time event hosting the homecoming of two P-47 World War II fighter planes that were made in Evansville. People all over the tri-state were invited to come and celebrate the homecoming held at Hangar One near the Evansville Regional Airport. While the P-47's ended up being held in Knoxville due to inclement weather, the team still managed to acquire a T-6 Trainer and B-25 for the event. During the event, attendees could get a picture of themselves next to the planes with photographs available for free download on the Courier and Press YourTurn photo gallery. Over 200 veterans, "Rosie the Riveters," and history buffs of all ages came out to honor Evansville's legacy.

Evansville Mayor, Lloyd Winnecke has proclaimed July 6, 2013, "P-47 Homecoming Day," in Evansville. "The P-47 shows the magnitude of what Evansville can accomplish," Mayor Winnecke stated. "It is a perfect example of our 'We are Evansville' community pride campaign."

In addition to planning the P-47 Homecoming event, Reese and her team completed a number of public relations services for the Freedom Heritage Museum such as social media training and facilitation, helping them create and secure relationships with upper echelon sponsorships, and developing a strategic plan for the organization's future. Eventually, the Freedom Heritage Museum hopes to incorporate their museum and Evansville's unique role in World War II into the curriculum of local elementary and middle school classes, sparking an appreciation early on. "You have to have that transfer of knowledge from this generation to all these down here that you want to come through the door," explained Reese.



Mayor Lloyd Winnecke sits in a WWII emergency vehicle while attending the P-47 Homecoming Event.

In the end, this project proved to be a huge learning experience for all parties involved. Reese stated, "Overall I think it was very positive. I think that they have a better appreciation (of public relations). I hope that they keep moving forward."