Veterans honored as 'Great Americans' at assembly

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Englewood Elementary School honored area veterans on Thursday during its annual Great Americans celebration.

Students were encouraged to invite a veteran to the event in the cafeteria, whether it be a family member or a friend.

Assisting with the ceremony was the Honor Guard from the Rotonda West American Legion, both a Girl Scout and Boy Scout troop and the school chorus led by Darlene Rodgers, the Great Americans program director and a veteran herself.

"This year it looks like we have the most veterans ever in attendance," Rodgers said after seeing the veterans take their turn standing during the placement of the different service flags and singing of each military branch's song.

U.S. Army Col. Darwin Hale, father of first-grade student Max Hale, who was dressed in his fatigues, just like his father, happened to be home on leave, so he could speak at the ceremony.

"I'm coming up on 30 years in the services since joining at 17," said Hale, who serves as a military police officer; his last appointment was in Afghanistan.

Hale proposed three questions to the students: What is a veteran? How many pockets on his or her uniform? Why do we celebrate Veterans Day?

After a few answers from the children, Hale added, "If you signed on the line and wear a uniform, you're a veteran."

The pocket question caused hundreds of hands to shoot up in the air and too many guesses. He finally started counting the obvious pockets on his pants and shirt, then surprised everyone with a couple of "secret" pockets, including one found inside his cap.

The total: 15.

The third question was answered only after Hale shared a few facts with the audience: There are 1.4 million active military and more than 830,000 reservists.

"Why Veterans Day? So we can remember each and every one of them and remember peace," Hale said. "Peace and how important it is to each of us."

Slipping in one final question — How do we show respect in the military? — Hale took the opportunity to teach the entire student body, teachers, staff and family members how to salute.

Each student who brought a veteran to the event was asked to come to the front and introduce the veteran.

Because of the large turnout, veterans with multiple students were asked to come up first; the rest would file up, starting with kindergarten through fifth-grade students.
Former U.S. Marine Corps Cpl. Matt Grannan, who served from 1993 to 1997 as a crew chief on Huey helicopters, providing close air support for ground troops, stood with his children, Cole, a second-grader, and Savannah, who is in kindergarten.

After being introduced by his son and personally thanked for his service, followed by a handshake from Rodgers, Grannan addressed the audience.

"Today is the United States Marine Corps' birthday," Grannan said.

Then, in his loudest, deepest voice, he belted out "Ooh-rah" the traditional Marines' cry of enthusiasm.

Golf tourney honors tireless volunteer

As foreboding skies held back rain, it was as if Pete Mason himself decreed that no golfer would suffer the wrath of a Florida fall rainstorm as a golf tournament held in his honor teed off Nov. 4 at the Boca Royale Golf and Country Club.

Regardless of the worrisome weather hovering over the Englewood course, more than 140 golfers left their umbrellas in their golf bags as the 2011 Pete Mason Memorial Golf Tournament began.

Basically, they were paying their dues to a man who helped transform the lives of so many young members of the Englewood YMCA.

So espirit de corps was far more important than saving par as the foursomes took to the fairways to benefit the YMCA Children and Family Scholarship program.

Less than a decade after his death, Mason has left a legacy that impacts a community determined to honor his spirit.

"We moved from New Jersey to Venice in 1977," Mason's widow, Geri, said after the tournament. "Right away he simply wanted to be involved with the community. He opened a branch of AG Edwards and, like his father, he respected the values a small town represented. Englewood wasn't too big back then."

As Englewood grew, so did Mason's participation in helping the youth of the burgeoning town.

"In a way, he was a pioneer," Geri said. "He was involved with the Venice Y, but when the Englewood Y opened, I couldn't contain him. He was so excited."

Teaching T-ball and football, Mason latched on to sports mentoring opportunities only year-round sunshine can offer, spending countless hours on the sidelines, always encouraging his young charges.

"I'm biased," Geri continued. "I loved the man.

"He was generous to a fault and refused to be a nine-to-five guy. The weekends were his time to give back to the community. I wish I could fill his shoes, but I don’t even try. It's impossible."

Having traveled from his home in Long Island, N.Y., Mason's younger brother, J.B., recounted his older sibling's philanthropic nature.

"It makes me so proud that Pete's thoughts and desires are going to continue throughout the local community," he said. "The money raised today will help young members of the Y to learn and grow and lead successful lives."

The day eventually raised $32,000 for the Y.
Although he did not know the tally at the time, just before the 8:30 a.m. tee time, Eric Fogo summed his reason for taking part in the event.

Looking to the sky, Fogo said, "This is how Pete would have wanted his work to be continued — having fun for a great cause."

— Ken Haggerty, correspondent

Six area students earn Keiser scholarships

Six area students were the recipients of new scholarships awarded by Keiser University as part of its 25th anniversary celebration.

The scholarships included a Founder's Scholarship; Developing Tomorrow's Talent Scholarship; Students Making a Difference Scholarship; Rising to New Heights Scholarship; Building the New Economy Scholarship; Today's Heroes, Our Leaders Scholarship; and the Keiser Mills Family Foundation Scholarship.

"In support of our communities, we are providing $1 million in new academic scholarships to Florida students in addition to our existing $12 million annual scholarship program," Belinda Keiser, vice chancellor of Community Relations and Student Advancement, said in a prepared statement.

Scholarship recipients enrolled locally or from Sarasota and Manatee counties are: Developing Tomorrow's Talent, Bryan Kohrmann, Eagle, Co.; Rising to New Heights, Sarah Kraft, Bradenton; Building the New Economy, Crystal Leduc, North Port; Today's Heroes, John Browning, Bradenton; and Keiser Mills Family Foundation, Carsten Kieffer, Maitland.

Wilson-Wood Foundation awards 2011 grants

The Wilson-Wood Foundation, a private, Nokomis-based family foundation serving Sarasota and Manatee counties has determined its grant disbursements for the 2011 grant year.

Twenty-four grants were awarded totaling $307,500. Grants awarded were:

Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Sun Coast, $10,000; Boys and Girls Clubs of Manatee County, $10,000; Boys & Girls Clubs of Sarasota County, $10,000; Children First, $10,000; Children's Academy of Southwest Florida, $15,000; Community Coalition on Homelessness, $25,000; Community Foundation of Sarasota County, $25,000.

Also, Easter Seals Southwest Florida, $15,000; Exchange Club Family Partnership Center of Manatee County, $10,000; Florida Center for Early Childhood, $10,000; Forty Carrots of Sarasota, $10,000; Girl Scouts of Gulf Coast Florida, $10,000; Girls Inc. of Sarasota County, $10,000; Gulfcoast Legal Services, $10,000; InStride Therapy, $10,000; Loveland Center, $10,000; Meals on Wheels Plus of Manatee, $12,500; Mental Health Community Centers, $20,000.

Also, Resurrection House, $10,000; Senior Friendship Centers, $15,000; South County Family YMCA, $15,000; Tidewell Hospice, $10,000; Cancer Support Community Florida Suncoast, $15,000; and Women’s Resource Center of Manatee, $10,000.