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Our Community Salutes members stand at a ceremony to honor high school graduates who are joining the Army. Kenneth Hartman, director of the iSchool at Drexel and United States Army veteran, founded OCS to recognize the students heading to the military.

Our Community Salutes honors students going to Army

Drexel Online director founded organization to recognize high school graduates entering armed forces

By: Josh Kurtz

Posted: 8/20/10

Kenneth Hartman, academic director of Drexel University Online and a United States Army veteran, is also founder of Our Community Salutes, an organization that honors high school graduates planning to enter the military.

The first Our Community Salutes ceremony was held in New Jersey in 2009. In 2010, ceremonies were held in New Jersey and Pittsburgh.

Hartman hopes between five and seven ceremonies will be held in 2011, including ones in Philadelphia and Cleveland.

The program expands by "each community waking up and recognizing there is a need" to recognize military enlistees, according to Hartman.

Hartman said he decided to start the organization after attending a graduation ceremony for the Cherry Hill, N.J., school district, where Hartman had served as a member of the school board.

"Much to my disappointment," there was no recognition given to students entering the military during the graduation, Hartman said.

Hartman said that the organization believes "these kids should be treated the same way" as students attending college, and they too should be recognized.

He added that many of the students entering the military might continue onto college later in life.

Hartman also said Our Community Salutes wants enlistees to remember the support from their community when they are challenged in the military.

Drexel has been a supporter of the program, according to Hartman and Joan McDonald, senior vice president of enrollment management.

McDonald said that in 2009 she attended the first Our Community Salutes of South Jersey ceremony after Hartman got her involved with the program.

"I thought it was a neat way to recognize high school students," McDonald said.

"These students have not historically been well received when leaving the high school community," she added.

McDonald said that while at the program, she reinforced to the students being honored that Drexel participates in the Yellow Ribbon Program, which is part of the Post 9/11 GI Bill. As part of Drexel's participation in the program, military veterans can attend the University free of charge if they pass government and admissions tests.

Drexel also hopes to help with an upcoming Our Community Salutes ceremony for Philadelphia students.

For the first time, Drexel specially honored Reserve Officers' Training Corps students as well as parents with military experience during its June 2010 commencement ceremonies.

Kenneth Wong, head of Our Community Salutes of Philadelphia, said "the response from Drexel [regarding the Philadelphia ceremony] has been nothing but positive."

Wong said he thought it was important for Philadelphia to organize such a ceremony.

It is "timely doing an event like this," Wong said.

"A lot of times we don't give young people enough credit for making good decisions," he added.

Wong learned about Our Community Salutes through his role as co-chair of the Army's Philadelphia Community Advisory Board, of which Hartman is also a member. Wong later attended the organization's South Jersey ceremony, which he said was an impressive and emotional event.

Wong is president of the Covenant Group of China and CIG Asia. He has no military experience but said he has great respect for the military's work overseas and in responding to natural disasters in the U.S.

Hartman said although the main goal of Our Community Salutes ceremonies is to honor students entering the military, the ceremonies have also had positive unintended effects.

The ceremonies, Hartman said, have helped support the enlistees' parents, some of whom are apprehensive

about their children joining the military.

At the ceremony, the enlistees' parents are "surrounded by people who look to their son or daughter as a hero," Hartman said.

The ceremony also invites veterans, helping fuse relationships between the veterans and new recruits.

Hartman added that the program also might help the military's retention of recruits, since the ceremony's support of new recruits could make some of them less likely to reverse their decision to enlist.

Hartman said one reason he started the organization was because of his military experience.

"I have a special place in my heart for people who choose to serve their country" by joining the military or an organization like the Peace Corps, Hartman said.

Hartman also said he hopes Our Community Salutes will show people that many students who join the military do not do so because they cannot get into college.

Hartman said the most rewarding part of his work with the organization is "looking into the eyes of these young people and their parents and seeing the pride that is bursting within them" because they know the community supports them.

The South Jersey Our Community Salutes ceremonies have taken place in The Mansion in Voorhees. An average of approximately 50 students and 260 other guests have attended the two South Jersey ceremonies.

The upcoming Philadelphia ceremony will probably include at least 300 to 400 attendees, according to Wong.

Hartman said he did not know how successful the program would be during its first year, but he became more confident due to the ceremony's attendance and the support the organization has received from the Pentagon.

The organization does not want funding from the government. It prefers all funding to be supplied privately.

According to Hartman, if a community does not fund its own ceremony, it does not deserve to have one.

"This is truly a grassroots effort," Hartman said.

The ceremonies feature speakers, including high ranking military officials, and the General Colin L. Powell Service Award, which is given to educators who have supported students interested in joining the military.

Hartman has organized the Our Community Salutes of South Jersey ceremonies. Although each city sets up its ceremony independently, Hartman provides guidance for new locations.

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