

As high school grads ship off to college, one local man is leading an effort to honor their peers who set aside books for boot camp. **By Jonathan Vit**

**A**t age 18, Sicklerville's Elizabeth Vollmar felt she was ready to join the Army Reserves.

For her father, it was a different story.

"He was worried about me going overseas with an AK strapped to my side," said Vollmar.

That's where a locally run organization, Our Community Salutes, came in. The group holds ceremonies recognizing high school graduates who enlist in the U.S. military; and for novice servicemen and their parents, this recognition can make for tremendous validation.

"Knowing that we are all supported it makes them feel a little bit better about their kids going into the Army," Vollmar said. "I

know it made my dad feel a lot better that he was there with me."

Amid the pomp and circumstance of high school graduation, the tearful accolades passed out from proud parents and the discussions of college entrance exams and choosing a major, it's all too easy to lose track of the small percentage of students who opt for a career in the military.

Cherry Hill resident Kenneth Hartman thinks those new recruits deserve just as many accolades as valedictorians and future Ivy Leaguers, and he decided to do something about it. He founded Our Community Salutes as a nonprofit organization. And, in 2009, the group held its first ceremony and

banquet at The Mansion in Voorhees. Some 54 enlistees and their families attended. Now in its second year, the program has spread from Camden County to include cities like Pittsburgh and Toledo, Ohio.

"There are a very small group of kids who make the decision to serve their country and serve in the military right out of high school," explained Hartman. "[And] we don't do anything for them. I said, 'That has to stop.'"

"I had no idea how it would turn out," said Hartman. "I had faith that if I built it, they would come. With nothing to fall back on, we did our first ceremony last year and we had 250 people [there]. Word got out about how successful it was, and we [now] have other communities like Pittsburgh doing it."

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Founder of Our  
Community Salutes

A veteran himself, Hartman remembers how hard it can be for new recruits in the U.S. military. No matter how gung ho, no matter how talented or physically fit, there will always be that time when a young recruit wonders if he or she has what it takes to soldier on against tremendous odds.

"That's why this ceremony is so important," Hartman said. "They are going to face a tremendous personal challenge and we hope that, when they are faced with that first challenge, they remember the 250 people who gathered that evening [to say 'thank you']."

The event also helps ease the worries of parents, many of whom fret over their children's safety. Among them is Winslow Township's Selina Coleman.

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"I thought that was absolutely wonderful," she said. "It actually, in a good way, made me cry. For a group of individuals who have no vested interests—these are not their kids—to take the initiative and say, 'Let's do something for them,' it shows that there [are caring people out there]."

Coleman's stepson, Jacob Coleman, joined the U.S. Army after struggling for years to complete high school. A Philadelphia native, Coleman, 20, originally attended the Robert Vaux High School in North Philly, but found the atmosphere less than productive. "The teachers could barely teach because the students were sitting on their desks, being loud, bullying each other," recalled Coleman, who moved to Winslow Township in 11th grade. "I liked Winslow. It was a more positive environment, so I could focus on what I had to do instead of worrying about someone bothering me every five minutes." Now committed to building a future in the U.S. Army, Coleman ships out to boot camp at Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri for training as a combat engineer in early August. For Coleman, high school graduation was sweet, but the Our Community Salutes event marked the beginning of his new career.

The military is becoming an increasingly attractive option to many young South Jersey residents. With the cost of college education rising and the country still digging out of one of the worst recessions in American history, the military, and the government's promise of free college tuition, have become increasingly attractive.

But that doesn't make it any easier to leave behind family, friends and all things familiar to take on boot camp and, potentially, overseas deployments.

Triton High School graduate Peter Cuoco Jr., who has joined the Marine Corps, can attest to that. And hearing his friends talk eagerly about college and their summer plans hasn't been easy, he said.

"It is kind of disheartening because they are going to have an awesome summer going to barbecues and parties and stuff, and they can't wait for college," Cuoco said. "They are going to be working hard, but they are going to be partying. I kind of envy them, because I am going to be working hard in boot camp."

But Cuoco hopes to make a career for himself in the Marine Corps.

"I've always wanted to join the military," said Cuoco. "Especially after 9/11."

Cuoco is a product of a generation that came of age during a time of war. He was only 10 years old when the terrorist attacks struck New York and Washington, D.C., and he grew up in a world of war movies and military-sponsored video games. For Cuoco, getting the chance to visit Paris Island and attend the same boot camp featured in his favorite movie, *Full Metal Jacket*, is the chance of a lifetime.

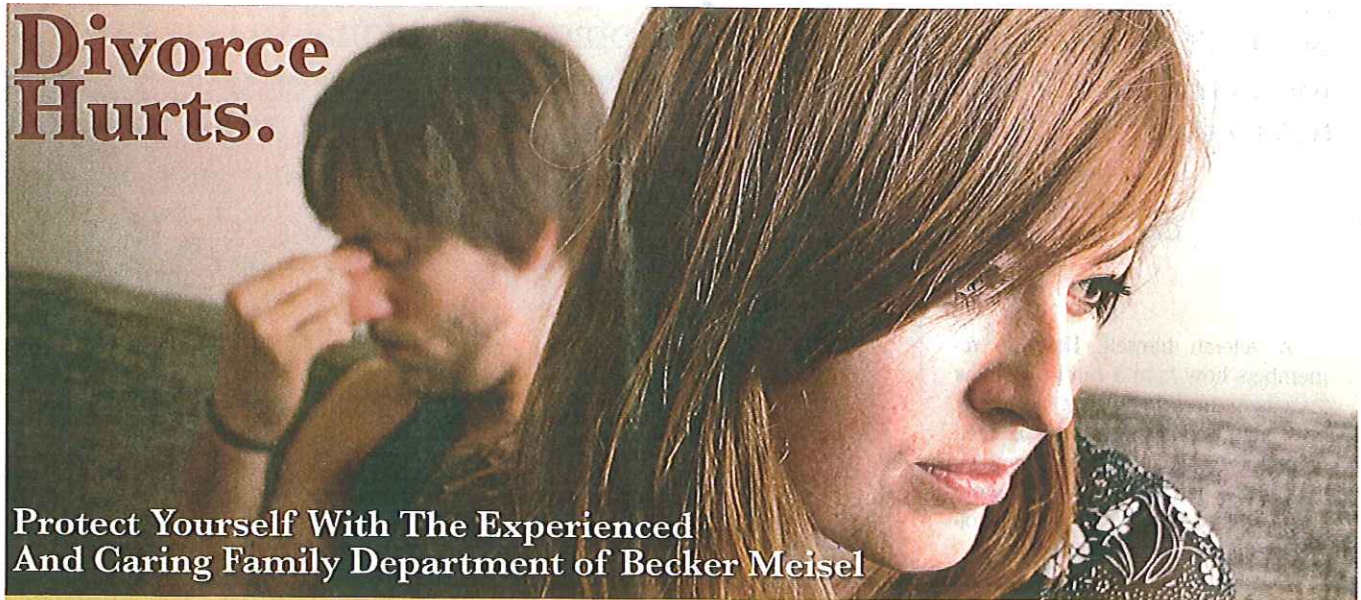
His father's enthusiasm is more contained. Sending his son to Afghanistan wasn't easy for him, but Cuoco has faith that his son will do the right thing under pressure.

"It would have been a little easier if he was just going off to college or something," said Peter Cuoco Sr. "You always have that feeling, as a parent, that you wouldn't want him to be harmed in any way."

It's for people like Peter Cuoco Jr., and his dad, that Hartman hopes Our Community Salutes can make a real difference.

"There is something about the chemistry in that room when you bring together veterans, young people going into the military, educators, their parents and the Marine Corps band," said Hartman. "It is a chemistry that comes together for an incredible evening." ■

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