

SOUTH JERSEY NEWS

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Camden County will honor students joining military

By Edward Colimore
Inquirer Staff Writer

On the stage of the Liacouras Center at Temple University, Cherry Hill school board member Ken Hartman handed diplomas to the township's high school graduates, then asked each of them a question:

"What are you going to do next year?"

Some of the Cherry Hill East and Cherry Hill West seniors told him they were going to the University of Pennsylvania, or Temple, or Rutgers. A handful said, "I'm going into the Army" or another branch of the military.

Hartman turned to a principal at last year's graduation ceremony and asked, "What are we doing for these kids?"

Nothing.

"None of the schools in Camden County recognized or honored the kids who were going into the military," Hartman said. "None of them recognized their parents. And I knew this had to stop."

He set up a committee and began mobilizing businesses, colleges, educators, and veterans groups to plan and fund the county's first High School Enlistee Recognition Ceremony.

The event, expected to be attended by more than 50 recruits and about 100 parents and other relatives, will be held June 2 at the Mansion on Evesham Road in Voorhees. It will feature a Marine Corps brass quintet from Quantico, Va.; several high-ranking officers, including a two-star general; and local celebrities such as former Eagle Vince Papale.

"Nowhere in my wildest dreams did I think the community would come together this quickly with this amount of enthusiasm," said Hartman, academic director of Drexel University Online and founder of Our Community Salutes of South Jersey, the group behind the event, which is expected to cost about \$10,000.

Contributions of \$50 or more poured in from businesses, groups, and individuals. Local veterans groups helped sponsor the dinner for the enlistees and parents. And the Mid-Atlantic Army Recruiting Battalion arranged for members of all the branches to be present.

"If it wasn't for the kids serving our country, their classmates wouldn't have the freedom to attend college," said Hartman, a former Army officer whose father was liberated by GIs from a detention camp in China during World War II. "They're making a sacrifice to serve the country."

Among the high school graduates planning to attend is 19-year-old Kelley Welsh, who will head to Marine Corps boot camp Aug. 10.

"When I was growing up, I wanted to do something I could be proud of," said Welsh, of Bellmawr, the fourth son of Joseph Welsh Jr. to join the Marines. "I wanted to do something that I could look back on later and say I accomplished something with my life. I think it's great that the community is showing their pride in the youth that are serving their country."

For families, though, "there's a heartache involved with this," said Welsh's father, 50, a 911 operator in Camden County. "We've been through three combat tours.

"Kelley looked at the living-room wall, where there are portraits of my other Marine sons, and he asked, 'What else would you expect?'"

The elder Welsh remembers when his son Joseph III graduated and names were read off at the ceremony.

"You'd hear, 'Here is John Smith, who is going to Rowan University, and next is Joseph Welsh,' and nothing was said.



DAVID SWANSON / Staff Photographer
Marine Corps enlistee Kelley Welsh (center), 19, of Bellmawr, with Ken Hartman (right) of the Cherry Hill school board and (clockwise from left) sister Kasey, 15; brother Joseph III, 27; father Joseph Jr., 50; mother Donna, 47; and brother Bill, 25. He is the fourth son to join.

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"That stuck in my mind. So I think it's about time somebody did something to honor" the graduates entering the military, he said. "They're marching off to war, and some may not be coming home."

Seeing the public's strong support for the recognition event has been gratifying to recruits such as Matthew Campbell, 19, of Sicklerville, who will leave for basic training July 8 with plans to serve in the Army National Guard.

"I'm excited to be appreciated and honored by the community," Campbell said. "It's also good for the moms and dads to hear about the college opportunities."

All parents at the event will receive the pamphlet "A Parent's Guide to Education in the U.S. Armed Services."

Some enlistees, such as Nikki Nelson, 18, of Audubon, have already gone through basic training. She completed it in her junior year and looks forward to comparing notes with other recruits at the event.

"I wanted to do something and know none of my peers had done the same," said the Audubon High School senior. "I've thrown hand grenades and shot M-16s. I came home from basic with more money than half of my high school has ever seen. How many have \$4,000?"

"I joined to serve my country, but I also like the educational benefits, especially with the economy the way it is."

Recognition for the dedication of such young people is long overdue, said her mother, Cindy Flietstra, 48, of Blackwood.

"It's taken years to recognize them when they're leaving and coming home," she said. "It's time to show our appreciation before they leave."

Having joined the Marines right out of high school, retired Lt. Col. Al Bancroft is thrilled by the decision of the seniors.

"I signed up and stayed in 33 years," said Bancroft, Camden County's director of military affairs. The event "is a great thing not only for students but for their families. They sacrifice, too."

The parents of college-bound students "are bragging about their kids," Hartman said. "I'm just tired of the parents of military-bound students thinking they are second-class citizens."

"I hope after this that when they're asked where their child is going, that they'll square their shoulders proudly and say, 'My child is going to serve the country.'"

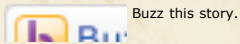
Word of the salute has spread to other counties, where officials are thinking of holding similar events.

Honoring the future service of the nation's young people is clearly an idea whose time has come, said Lt. Col. Ronald Tuczak, commander of the Army Mid-Atlantic Recruiting Battalion.

"This is the first instance where I've heard of this," Tuczak said. "I've been mentioning it to others, and I hope it will spread. It's fantastic when a community pulls together to see kids recognized like this."

For more information, go to <http://go.philly.com/salutes>

Contact staff writer Edward Colimore at 856-779-3833 or ecolimore@phillynews.com.

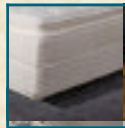


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Posted by **ShroomCheeseSteak** 07:52 AM, 05/24/2009

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This is a story a way too long time in hearing/reading. We always read about the HS athletes who sign letters of intent with colleges and/or universities to ply the trade of their athletic prowess into a college scholarship but never hear of the "letter of intent" students such as these profiled here sign to watch over us as we sleep safely under the blanket of freedom. Many thanks from a grateful nation to these young men and women as well as to their families for their service as they embark on a noble and fantastic voyage of duty and honor in the name of freedom. Freedom is not free. Stay safe; stay vigilant; come home to us. "Watch your six" and "keep your powder dry!"

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Posted by **Civilserver** 07:23 PM, 05/24/2009 [Sign in to report abuse](#)

CrimeLord what planet are you from, 3 years, try 8 genius. And a "free college education" yeah right. Oh and that paycheck they get, BELOW poverty level. And as the father of a combat vet, it was life changing for him... So stand and clap for your poor little wanna be a teacher kid ,we'll wait. I dont know why they enlist with morons like you running your mouth. God Bless and watch over these kids. I am proud of them!

Posted by **arjunr** 01:00 AM, 05/25/2009 [Sign in to report abuse](#)

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