

[Homepage](#) > [News Archives](#) > [Article](#)

New York City Hails U.S. Army Future Soldiers at First 'Our Community Salutes of Brooklyn'

June 20, 2011

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For many college-bound high school graduates, freshman orientations and term papers are on the horizon, yet for some New York City and Long Island-based seniors, they are rewriting graduation traditions by pursuing a different pathway to their future through service in the U.S. Armed Forces.

More than 200 new servicemembers - approximately 50 U.S. Army Future Soldiers - were saluted by their communities June 9 during the first Our Community Salutes of Brooklyn ceremony, which publicly recognizes and honors high school students - and their parents - who plan to enlist in the U.S. Armed Services after graduation.

And with such a short distance away from the World Trade Center site, this ceremony brought home the remarks made by one guest speaker, U.S. Marine Corps Brig. Gen. Robert F. Hedelund, director of Marine and Family Programs Division, Quantico, Va.

"You are joining the warrior class, which a mere one percent of our country's population is a part of," Hedelund said. "Only qualified applicants enter this warrior class, which is why service to the nation is revered by our countrymen as a great and respectable job. And I couldn't pass up this opportunity to come talk with you young men and women tonight to thank you for your courage to step forward and serve. And to your parents, who have prepared you as patriots ... danger may await them, but know that will take care of everyone of them."

And who better to hail these new recruits into the ranks of their respective branches of service than Our Community Salutes (OCS) of Brooklyn - an all-volunteer force comprised of college and school officials, veterans' service organizations, political leaders, business people, community residents and local Armed Forces recruiting personnel. Spearheaded by Josh Gordesky, a father and a U.S. Air Force veteran, with guidance from OCS' original founder, Kenneth E. Hartman, Ph.D., a U.S. Army veteran and former Cherry Hill, N.J., school board

member, OCS of Brooklyn counters the tradition of a societal culture that does not traditionally acknowledge at graduation time students' decisions to serve their country in the U.S. military.

"Tonight, I want every recruit to walk out of here knowing an entire community says thank you for choosing to serve your country," said Gordesky, whose passion and drive for OCS of Brooklyn are so unyielding, that he recruited his spouse and parents-in-law into the all-volunteer OCS of Brooklyn force.

The salute to the troops included commentary from many prominent guest speakers, including Stewie Stone, stand-up comedian, Marty Markowitz, Brooklyn Borough president, Frances Hesselbein, president and chief executive officer of the Leader to Leader Institute of New York, Dominic A. Morelli, executive director for the Greater New York-Statue of Liberty Chapter of the Association of the U.S. Army and Myron Berman, a U.S. Army veteran and New York State U.S. Army Reserve ambassador, who presented remarks on behalf of the Chief of the U.S. Army Reserve, Lt. Gen. Jack C. Stultz.

"We want the young people of our audience to know they are really very special people who are about to embark on an experience that will serve them well for the rest of their lives," Berman said. "We are proud of you all, and want you to know you are about to become a member of a great family where you will not know people immediately, but over time and through service together, you will develop friends with your fellow servicemembers, friends you will no doubt have support you for the rest of your lives."

For 17-year-old Hunter Samdolski, a junior at Connetquot High School in Bohemia, Long Island, the ceremony was very gratifying, reinforcing the certainty of his decision to enlist during 11th grade.

"Ever since I was a little kid, I've always wanted to serve in the Army," said Samdolski, whose loyalty and patriotism was inspired by his grandfather, a retired U.S. Army colonel. "I am somewhat scared and excited at the same time, but I have lots of love and support from my parents." Samdolski, a future U.S. Army logistician, has enlisted into the U.S. Army Reserve for the education benefits and for the respect he hopes to obtain through a career in service to his nation.

According to Hartman, the son of a former WWII prisoner of war, it's quite possible that Samdolski and many others like him, could emerge from college debt free and even graduate the same time as many of their peers who take six years to finish college.

"We [parents] are very proud and honored for our son, Hunter," said Samdolski's mother, Lisa Steinhauer. "The Army comes first for him, and they have helped him put together a great plan for his future, so it makes me, as a mother, feel good that the Army is taking care of him. This ceremony is something we didn't have twenty, thirty years ago, so thank you for doing this."

And as Hartman stated in an American Forces Press Service article, "To join the military and serve your country is an awesome feat. To serve your country at a time of war says a lot about your character and how much you love your country. This should never go unnoticed." And with OCS of Brooklyn on the horizon, the winds of change in our New York neighborhoods are settling in.

According to Sgt. 1st Class Christopher L. Dash, Samdolski's noncommissioned officer assigned to the U.S. Army Career Center Patchogue, community support is always appreciated, especially for our U.S. Army Future Soldiers who participated in this first-time ceremony in Brooklyn.

"When someone decides to put their life on the line for their country, they've made a very big decision with their future," said Dash. "We owe it to those folks like Pvt. Samdolski to say thank you, and by tradition, we owe it to them to welcome them " to hail them " into a great military community and a great U.S. Army."

"This event, which is the first of its kind in the New York City area, really provides the opportunity for our community to come together and recognize the important decision of those high school seniors who have made the all-important commitment to serve and defend their country by enlisting for military service," said Lt. Col. Omuso D. George, commander of the U.S. Army Recruiting Battalion New York City. "Some of these young men and women will attend college or enter the civilian workplace after high school while serving in the U.S. Army Reserve, and others may go directly into the military right after graduation ... but the bottom line is they have stood up to serve their country, and that is something we should all applaud. I expect this recognition to pick up steam here and be even bigger and better in years to come."

Having an OCS event in any battalion's footprint yields many positive results, including a reduction in Future Soldier loss because OCS helps to build military camaraderie and esprit de corps among troops, especially among those personnel waiting months to ship to BCT. The introduction to other Future Soldiers in their area also widens their sphere of new military friends. An OCS event attracts participation of veterans' service organizations by allowing them to 'pay it forward' to the next generation of service men and women to whom we owe our deepest gratitude. OCS garners positive media attention within the community enhancing the public support for U.S. Army recruiting, and lastly, OCS helps to enhance the relationship between the military recruiting noncommissioned officer and high school guidance counselors, who serve as centers of influence for the U.S. Army recruiting mission in all our schools.

*** This article was produced with research support from the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, the American Forces Press Service, the U.S. Army's Recruiter Journal, Kenneth Hartman, and www.ourcommunitysalutesofbrooklyn.com.

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