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Vet sets banquet to honor military's newest

By ADAM SMELTZ
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For college-bound high school graduates, it's a season of community celebration.

They're honored at big receptions.

Parents slap on the bumper stickers, advertising where their sons and daughters are headed for higher degrees.

But in Cherry Hill, school board member Ken Hartman wondered about the minority -- the fraction of South Jersey high school graduates who go straight from school into military service.

"What do we do for (them)?" said Hartman, a two-year school board member who served throughout the 1980s in the National Guard.

Having found no official recognition in Camden County for the new military enlistees, Hartman has launched a campaign this year to honor the service-bound men and women.

His new nonprofit group, Our Community Salutes of South Jersey, has put together a formal dinner and awards ceremony scheduled for June 2 at The Mansion in Voorhees. A college fair will precede the event, to which 54 enlistees and their families have been invited -- no fee required.

The invitees include all the 2009 high school graduates from the county's 21 high schools who are headed into military service.

"I don't think we get any (recognition) at all" otherwise -- except from relatives and the schools, said Nikki Nelson, 18, an Audubon High School senior.

She joined the Army National Guard when she was 17 and will leave for training at Fort Lee, Va., in July. She said she joined the service to help pay for her college education, avoid the 9-to-5 grind and find opportunities "to do whatever I wanted to do."

And she plans to attend the Operation Recognition ceremony next month, Nelson said.

"It's nice to be able to be recognized for being so young and being in the military," she said.

For the event, Hartman has pulled together contributions and support from more than 50 veterans groups, local educators and businesses. At least one counselor from each county high school plans to attend, along with representatives of local colleges and universities.

Former Philadelphia Eagle Vince Papale is a scheduled speaker for the evening, and NBC10 anchor Terry Ruggles is the listed emcee. As many as 300 people are expected.

Hartman said his nonprofit operation is working with a \$10,000 budget, about 75 percent of which has been raised. Organizers are continuing to press for contributions through their Web site.

"We want to send these graduates and their parents off with a high-class, quality event," Hartman said. ". . . We want this to be a community's way of saying, 'Thank you.' We don't want the government to pay for it. We don't want the families to pay for it."

A Marine Corps brass quartet will be on hand for the evening. And each of the enlistees will receive a proclamation from the state Senate and a gold coin, Hartman said.

He hopes the young military men and women will remember -- and be helped by -- their community's support when they inevitably face rough circumstances, he said.

Lt. Col. Al Bancroft, a Vietnam War veteran, said he did not receive any such honor when he joined the Marine Corps in 1958.

"Nobody said a thing. I just went out and did my thing," said Bancroft, an Operation Recognition organizer and the military-affairs director for the Camden County government.

He said the June 2 event "is a great way to recognize not only (enlistees) but their family members, their mothers and fathers. They're the ones who have to worry about them."

Planners said they hope to grow the event and make an annual tradition.

"I think (enlistees) will feel supported and know that they have the support system right in their hometowns," said Jennifer Grimaldi, a Haddonfield school counselor and event organizer. She said Hartman "was absolutely right that they needed some type of recognition at the end of graduation, to send them off and know that we support them."

To Bancroft, the concept shows patriotism.

"A lot of students -- if they're valedictorians, if you get all A's, you get recognized," Bancroft said. But more average students, he said, don't often get such special treatment.

"I think this is a good way to say, 'Hey, thanks, guys,' " Bancroft said.

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Additional Facts

ON THE WEB

Our Community Salutes of South Jersey: www.ourcommunitysalutes.com
