

CANYON COURIER

West Jeff students honor, thank local veterans

By Corinne Westeman

Wednesday, November 16, 2016 at 1:55 pm

“Service before self.”

That message was shared by several members of the military and the community with West Jefferson Middle School during a Veterans Day ceremony Friday morning.

“We went when we were called, to be part of something bigger than ourselves,” Sgt. 1st Class Peter Benning told the students during an assembly in the gymnasium.

Benning, the husband of the school’s orchestra/band teacher, Laura Garrison-Benning, was among the active-duty or veteran military speakers who addressed the students. He reflected on how military members and their families have had to “make sacrifices to give fully and absolutely of ourselves.”

He recalled how military spouses must see their husbands or wives go off to dangerous places; how children have to share stories with their mom or dad over the phone or video-call; or how parents have had to bury children who were killed in the line of duty.

“ ‘Service before self’ defines us, because we put others first,” Benning continued. “There’s no better way to thank a veteran than by learning what it means to serve and sacrifice.”

After Benning’s speech, community members Frank Wanken, John Wickham, Art Gutierrez and Barbara Wickham — all of whom have children or grandchildren enrolled at the school — addressed the students in their turn, sharing their experiences as a veteran or active-duty service member.

The ceremony also included an armed forces medley, a student thank-you video montage, the presentation of the colors, and the Pledge of Allegiance.

Barbara Wickham read excerpts from letters the students had written to thank and honor the veterans. One described them as “heroes” who “keep us safe, and saved millions of lives.” Another thanked them for “upholding the Constitution.” The final one Wickham read was from a student who hoped to follow their example of serving in the military, saying, “I want to put my life on the line for this country.”

After each speech, the entire assembly of students, teachers, guests, and fellow veterans rose to their feet, applauding and cheering. Following Wanken’s speech, he asked the students to call out a chant of “U-S-A,” and the assembly enthusiastically obliged.

Keynote speaker Brig. Gen. Laura Clellan of the Colorado Army National Guard shared her story with the students, saying she initially joined after she ran out of money her freshman year of college.



Brigadier General Laura Clellan, center, greets West Jefferson Middle School students following the school's Veterans Day ceremony. Clellan, of the Colorado Army National Guard, was the celebration's keynote speaker.

But, ultimately, she chose to continue serving to “make sure that we have those freedoms — of speech, of voting, of going to school — because not every country has them.”

Clellan said that during her time in the military, she has “seen beautiful places, done cool things, and worked with amazing people.”

She told the students she was proud of them for recognizing veterans, and encouraged them to keep up their efforts and continue thanking veterans whenever they meet them.

“Tell them: ‘Thank you for my way of life,’” Clellan said.

Following Clellan’s keynote speech, the eighth-grade band and orchestra played “America the Beautiful.” One student had written in her thank-you letter that she was going to be playing the song for her grandfather and all veterans, in the hope that the song reached them.

The students exited the gym and lined the hallways so they could applaud the service members as they exited. Much like the standing ovations, the students showed tangible enthusiasm for the veterans, offering them smiles, cheers, applause and the occasional high-five.

Reflections of gratitude

At a reception for veterans, service members and guests after the ceremony, the group swapped stories and experiences.

“It’s a nice opportunity to talk to (veterans) from other generations,” Navy veteran Jim Bollum said of the event.

Bollum, of Commerce City, said he attended after his son J.J., an eighth-grader who played saxophone during the ceremony, invited him to come. The veteran said he was very proud to hear his son play, and gave J.J. his military challenge coin to hold for the day.

Bollum said the event was well-organized, and that “it was nice to see the school go all out” in supporting the veterans.

Army veteran and West Jeff teacher Jennifer Hodges said the number of veteran and community attendees had seen “tremendous growth” from last year’s event, which was the first one. Hodges also commented that she was proud of the students for showing respect toward the veterans, noting that the pupils started all of the standing ovations.

“They took it to heart and gave the veterans their attention,” she continued. “... It’s important that kids see that what they learn in the military can help them later in life.”

Clellan commented that her first visit to the school on Veterans Day gave her an opportunity “to stop and reflect on the deeper part of why I serve.”

“I love the energy in middle school,” said Clellan, saying she once was a middle school teacher. “It was very inspiring to see the young people understand and recognize what the military does for them and for all of us.”

Also at the reception, Miles Garrison, 10, and Ella, 8, were enjoying a midmorning snack with their mom, Laura Garrison-Benning, and stepdad Peter Benning. Ella said she misses him whenever he’s deployed, and feels safer when he’s home.

Miles added that Benning’s speech was very meaningful, and that he’s very proud of his stepdad for serving in the military.

“He’s saving other people’s families,” Miles said. “It’s really cool that he’s giving other people freedom.”