

VETERANS DAY CELEBRATION

Giving honor where it's due

BY PAUL SCHOTT



Tyler Sizemore / Hearst Connecticut Media

U.S. Marines Sgt. Joe Darula, left, and Cpl. John Paul Marchett carry a wreath to be placed outside during the Veterans Day ceremony at Riverside School on Tuesday. Local veterans young and old joined elementary students, parents and town leaders to celebrate the achievement and sacrifices of those who have served in the U.S. military.



At left, Riverside fifth-graders Caroline Byrne, center, and Aalyiah Brown, right, sing with the student chorus.



Specialist teacher Lauren Regan, left, and other faculty sing at the Veterans Day ceremony.

Tuesday marked one of the proudest days of the year for retired Marine Cpl. John Paul Marchetti.

On the Marine Corps' 240th birthday, Marchetti, 35, spoke to a crowd of several hundred at Riverside School's 15th annual Veterans Day ceremony.

The occasion reminded him of his appreciation for the family and military tradition to which he belongs, he said. Enlisting in the armed services fulfilled the American Dream for the fourth of six children of a couple who moved more than 40 years ago from their native Bari, Italy, to seek a better life in the U.S.

“What I inevitably learned throughout my training and young life experiences is that freedom is not free and that the sacrifices that our military men and women make every day are tremendous and honorable,” Marchetti said. “Enlisting in the Marine Corps was a way for me to give back to this great nation, a nation that gave my parents and many others opportunities and possibilities to prosper and live in freedom.”

Marchetti served in the Marine Reserves from 1998 to 2004, including deployments focused on ship security in the Persian Gulf and Red Sea during Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom. He now owns Applausi Osteria, an Italian restaurant in Old Greenwich. He, his wife and three young children live in Stamford.

A forecast of rain forced the ceremony, usually held in front of the school, into the gymnasium, but it did not dampen the patriotic fervor of the students, educators, parents and veterans gathered together.

World War II veteran John Macri held the Stars and Stripes aloft for a symbolic flag raising. The school's chorus and the Riverside Women's Chorus sang a number of anthems, including "America the Beautiful" and "God Bless the USA."

"This is our annual salute to ordinary people who did extraordinary things for our country and for our freedom," said Riverside Principal Christopher Weiss. "I do encourage everyone, as you head out at the end of the day today and, of course, tomorrow during Veterans Day, to take time to really think about those who have given so much for our country."

Superintendent of Schools William McKersie led students in a tribute that asked them to use their heads, hearts and hands to represent their gratitude.

"Veterans, we thank you for using your minds so well to help us," McKersie said. "We thank you for your big, big hearts that have served so well. We thank you for your strong hands that embrace all of us."

The attendees included First Selectman Peter Tesei, Selectman John Toner, Fire Chief Peter Siecienski, state Reps. Mike Bocchino and Fred Camillo, state Sen. L. Scott Frantz and a number of veterans with children or grandchildren at Riverside.

"It's my favorite (holiday) because what the holiday represents is a celebration of what is so great about our country," Frantz said. "We have veterans who have performed incredible acts for our country, for freedom, for justice and for all the great things that we know about this country. They've sacrificed a great deal."

There were somber moments as well. A color guard marched out of the gym to lay a memorial wreath in front of the school. The audience observed a moment of silence for the seven Riverside alumni who died in World War II and in Korea and Vietnam. The school's band later played taps to commemorate the sacrifices of fallen service members.

Fourth-grader and chorus member Lara Olmsted said singing during the ceremony inspired her.

“It means a lot to me,” said Lara, who aspires to be a Marine. “One day I hope to be standing up there and the new Riverside chorus will be singing.”

Fellow chorus member and fourth-grader Corinne Kilcullen, whose father served in the Army, said Veterans Day made her feel proud of her father

“It just feels really good to be standing and singing in front of veterans,” Corinne said.

Fourth-grader Marcos Piccininno, also a chorus member, expressed similar gratitude.

“Veterans Day means a lot to me,” Marcos said. “When I imagine that people risked their lives just for us, it makes me happy and grateful that they did that.”
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