

Stockton Honors Sacrifices of Those Who Serve in Military at Veterans Day Ceremonies

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Galloway, N.J. - The sacrifices of veterans, current service members and their families were honored today in three ceremonies at Stockton University.

Tom O'Donnell, assistant dean of Students and Veteran Affairs at Stockton, celebrated Stockton's national recognition as one of the best universities in the nation for veterans, and said, "Today we honor our brave men and women who protected our freedom at all costs."

Stockton today was ranked in the Top 20 four-year colleges and universities for veterans by the Military Times' "[Best for Vets: Colleges 2017](#)," and by the Online College Plan's "[Top 20 Best 4-Year Colleges for Veterans](#)."

O'Donnell noted that he will be retiring at the end of the academic year as head of the Office of Veteran Affairs, which opened in 2008. "But this will not be my last ceremony at Stockton," he said. "It's part of my DNA."

"Our great program is supported from the top down," he said, "President Harvey Kesselman has been a steadfast supporter," he noted, also citing Vice President for Student Affairs Thomasa Gonzalez, Associate Vice President for Student Affairs Dee McNeely-Greene, Dean of Students Pedro Santana and the Veterans Team, the Stockton Student Veterans Organization (SVO) and faculty mentors.

"We are proud to have our veterans succeed not only academically but when they leave and get jobs," O'Donnell said.

Provost Lori Vermeulen gave welcoming remarks honoring veterans in front of the Campus Center on behalf of President Kesselman and the university. She said Stockton's veterans have excellent graduation and retention rates, an accomplishment of which they can be proud. She also noted that her husband is a veteran of the Marine Corps, and she was grateful for having been part of a service family.

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Paul Garraty is president of the SVO and active in the Kappa Sigma fraternity's Xi Rho chapter, which works on veteran suicide prevention and homelessness as part of its Military Heroes Campaign.

"It's OK to be OK," Garraty said, urging his fellow vets to "get the care you need - it isn't a handout." But he also said veterans are strong and unified. Referring to the "polarizing" recent elections, Garraty said he had seen civilian friendships splinter - "but not amongst you - the veterans. The unity among veterans here at Stockton remains steady and immovable."

"Seize your place in history," Garraty said.

Assemblyman Chris Brown (R-Atlantic), an Army veteran of the war in Iraq who was awarded the Bronze Star Medal and Combat Infantryman Badge, was the keynote speaker.

He said, "Even though I was in law school and halfway through a semester," when he got notice he was being activated, he did not seek a deferral.

"If I didn't go, someone else would have to go," he said. "I understood that our freedom requires defense across the globe." He noted that serving overseas is also a learning experience, and he was able to finish law school when he returned.

He addressed young people who may be struggling with college debt or a tough job market, and said: "The more you believe in this great country, the more this country will do for you."

He said when he returned home he was welcomed, but that was not the case for Vietnam veterans. Despite that, most of them prevailed by getting jobs, raising children and being active citizens. "They are examples of what it means to have a love of country," he said.

Archbishop de Paulo, of the Old Catholic Confederation which represents over one million Christians in the United States, Canada and the United Nations, talked about veterans in the invocation. "Through their sacrifices, we may all enjoy peace and prosperity." He asked God to "send your holy and healing grace upon them."

Lt. Col. Lawrence P. Stawicki, of the United States Marine Corps, also referenced the recent elections and said: "The Democratic process did take place and you can very easily make the case" that it took place because of the traditions and sacrifices generations of veterans have made, starting with the Revolutionary War.

"You are brothers and sisters in arms and part of an elite group" Stawicki said. "Less than 10 percent of the U.S. population" has served.

Santana, dean of Students, spoke at the second part of the ceremony at Independence Plaza, in front of the "largest two-story replica of the Declaration of Independence in the world." The site commemorates the role of Richard Stockton, the university's namesake and one of the signers of the Declaration.

He said Independence Walk is made up of bricks, each of which "represent the contributions of all Americans." He reminded the gathering that veterans' sacrifices sometimes include leaving behind widows, widowers and children.

He asked the crowd to take notice of the honor chair remembering prisoners of war and those missing in action as they moved to the third stage of the ceremony, at Veterans Park, "a haven and a sanctuary."

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The chair was permanently installed near the Veterans Lounge earlier this year as part of the national Rolling Thunder POW/MIA Honor Chair Program bringing daily reminders of the courageous men and women who have not returned home from war. Stockton is the only higher education institution in the region to receive this honor.

Nelson Gonzalez of the Catholic Charities Homeless Veterans program, and Robert Sistler, a licensed social worker with Cooperative Care Partnership, Inc., both alumni of the Stockton SVO, spoke about how Stockton had welcomed them as non-traditional, older students.

Stockapella, a student a capella group, sang the national anthem and “Amazing Grace” during the ceremonies. Members of the Galloway Township Police Department, the Campus Police K-9 unit and members of the Stockton SVO presented the colors.

Sistler and his wife, Ty, who is also a veteran and an alumna, placed a memorial wreath in Veterans Park, located adjacent to G-Wing, after Stockton student Brielle Lord played “Taps.”

Robert Cannon, of the Stockton Student Veteran Advisory Board and a Marine veteran, said, “One day is not enough to honor” veterans. “Veterans are from any walk of life,” he said, noting that many are young people who enlist after high school. “They are looking to fulfill something inside them that drives them to a higher cause. Our country today is stronger because of each and every one of them.”

A luncheon was held in the Campus Center Event Room, with a presentation of awards and certificates to the Warrior Champion Essay Winners, students Brittany Hayes, in first place, and Marissa Luca and Alexis Propovitch, who tied for second place. An open mic session allowed for Veterans Day reflections from the public.

To learn more about Stockton’s programs for veterans and students who are currently serving, visit the [Office of Veteran Affairs](#).

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