

School, community thank veterans, active military personnel

Written by Elizabeth Barrett

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Program features Nebraska National Guard speakers.

Acknowledging the sacrifice veterans have made and active military servicemen and women continue to make was the theme of Gothenburg Public School's annual Veteran's Day program last Thursday.

Speakers and musicians honored local veterans through music, song, speeches and lunch.

Superintendent Mike Teahon said he, school personnel and students were proud to recognize veterans for protecting the nation's way of life, freedom and what Americans believe in.

GHS senior Coltin Bebensee, who completed Nebraska National Guard training last summer, said he was proud to join their ranks.

Family and consumer science teacher Dee Jorgensen, a former member of the Nebraska National Guard, was the featured speaker.

Dee Jorgensen

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“You know how people always give advice about public speaking and tell you that it helps to alleviate stress when you imagine people in their underwear? I’m here to tell you, it doesn’t work. It just made me feel more uncomfortable, so I’m REALLY glad you all woke up this morning, went to your closets, and chose to wear the clothes you’re wearing. You have the freedom to choose what to wear and what to have for breakfast. You may ask yourself, ‘How will I spend my day?’ Perhaps you’ll spend time creating, or cleaning, or watching TV. Perhaps you will spend time with friends or family. These are freedoms we tend to take for granted every day. These are privileges we can thank a veteran for.



“I’ve been teaching FCS for many years (formerly known as home ec). I see many parallels between what I teach and the life of a soldier. I teach fashion technology. The clothing we wear represents a lot about us—our style and who we are. It also serves to identify and protect us. A soldier sacrifices the right to wear what they choose in order to wear the uniform which represents hard work, commitment, honor, unselfishness, patriotism, and so much more. It is worn with pride.

“I also teach foods and nutrition. Food provides us with nourishment, creating energy, and it also gives us enjoyment. Those who serve overseas sacrifice family and holiday dinners and many times miss out on the variety or nutritional value available to us. Their favorite foods—comfort foods—which are so pleasing to the senses. Food is a basic need. Allow me to share a story relating to this.

“It is a true story of a young man—eighth grade and 14 years old like many of you in this room. He grew up in a family that was so poor he didn’t have any photos of his childhood. They couldn’t afford food, either, so he quit school and left home in search of a way to survive. He needed to find work so he could eat, like many young Americans during this time—the Depression.

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“I remember him saying, ‘You can’t learn when you’re hungry.’ I would venture to say the majority of us have no idea what it’s like to go without food for several days. He rode the rails (railroad) working many jobs all over the U.S., staying at YMCAs and camping out, until he was old enough to join the National Guard. He was then drafted into the army. It was now WW II.

“In his regiment, 4,000 men stepped forward to join the paratroopers, the men who jump out of airplanes, and only half of them passed the tests and completed the training. He was one of those men. The 101st Airborne Division. The Screaming Eagles.

“They went on to more intense preparation for the war, sometimes doing five jumps in five days. He told me the thrill of each jump never diminished, even after 24 jumps. He knew he was involved in something historically significant. They were ready for the enormous task ahead.

“General Eisenhower was quoted as saying one of the smartest things he ever did was using the paratroopers on D-Day (the invasion of Nazi-occupied Europe, June 6th, 1944). In a photo, just before D-Day, this man was standing next to General Eisenhower. This is a very famous photo taken at a very significant point in the war. What a feeling that must have been for him to see this in the history books and know he was a part of it. General Eisenhower was addressing the paratroopers before their mission, and he fought back tears as he left them that day.

“It was now the night before D-Day. The planes are flying over Normandy and the paratroopers are preparing for their drop into the dark, vast unknown. If you’ve seen the movie ‘Saving Private Ryan,’ in those first intense moments, it would have been similar to that. Imagine what it must have been like for those men—fear, shaking nerves, turbulence, motion sickness and not knowing if you’re going to live, die, or be wounded in the next few moments of your life. Then, being dropped into the darkness to face it all head on.

“In case you haven’t figured it out yet, this man was my dad. For you gamers, you might play ‘Call of Duty.’ These men were living it. As he landed, he threw a hand grenade in the direction of a German soldier coming toward him and then my dad was shot twice. He spent the rest of the night alone in the dark with gunshot wounds and feeling numb at the time.

“His parents didn’t receive this telegram reporting him as missing until nearly two months later. This would be a nightmare for any parent.

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“Back to D-Day. My dad was captured when daylight hit. He was unable to get away due to his gunshot wounds, and he became a prisoner of war. His parents weren't notified he was a POW and still alive until nearly three months after D-Day. Two weeks after being captured, he finally received medical attention and the bullets were removed. This is when the real pain began. The other soldiers shared their first aid packs and morphine, which would relieve the pain for about eight hours at a time. By the time it was all used up, he was addicted to the morphine. For the next 10 days, he suffered from the most excruciating pain of his life, sweating profusely and every joint and muscle of his body in pain as he detoxed, along with the pain of his bullet wounds.

“He was a POW for nine months of his life. He lost a lot of weight and became very thin. There were bed bugs so bad, sometimes they had to sleep standing up. The water they were given would make people sick. They were not fed well, sometimes a piece of bread and very often turnips or turnip soup. He said they would pick out the worms before eating it, but often joked that after three days of being hungry they would try not to let the worms get away—a little extra protein.

“Eventually American soldiers took over the camp and my dad made his way home to Nebraska. He returned as a war hero with 2 Purple Hearts and a Bronze Star. He was honored in countless parades and celebrations all of his life.

“He married my mom, sitting right here today, and had only one request of her before their wedding day. Never, never, never serve him turnips. To this day, I have never tasted a turnip. When you eat your next meal, be thankful for it.

“They had four children together, and I am the baby, often called the tag-along since I'm a decade younger than my siblings.

“In my classes, I also teach about balancing work, home, and family. We learn about financial management as well. We discuss coping skills to deal with life's challenges, which may include grief or loss, and the inner strength needed to make it through the tough times. Soldiers face all of these issues and it changes a person to face

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