

Don Lugo High students interview, honor area veterans

Six years into coordinating an event in which students interview military veterans for an oral history project, Don Lugo High teacher Chuck Pope is still brought to tears by it.

The history teacher attributes his high emotions to his pride in America and the way the dozens of students react to the veterans they are interviewing. "Look at their faces and see how intent they are," he said, pointing to the history students who dressed up for the occasion.

This year's event drew 90 veterans, the largest group ever, organizers Mr. Pope and history teacher Tara Ragsdale said. It began six years ago with 40 veterans in the school library.

At tables spread throughout the school gym, each veteran is interviewed by five or more students.

The event kicked off with the presentation of the American and California flags by members of Don Lugo High's Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps. Senior Celine Concepcion wowed the large audience with her rendition of the National Anthem, and the Don Lugo High Band performed "America the Beautiful." Veterans were asked to stand as the band played their military branch's anthem.

Don Lugo's culinary students provided lunch for the veterans and guests.

A small table at the front of the gym sat empty. It represented Missing in Action and Prisoners of War. Items on the table, including a red rose, symbolized aspects of those soldiers' service and how they are missed by loved ones.

Many of the veterans wore their original uniforms, and brought mementos of their service, including badges, photographs, and military manuals.

"It's the biggest history lesson we could give our students," Ms. Ragsdale said. "Everything we're teaching in the classroom, they can get right here. When all is said and done, kids say they get it."

Don Lugo principal Kimberly Cabrera, daughter of an Army Reservist, and sister of a Marine, said this was her first experience with the event. "I didn't know what to expect and I am overwhelmed," she said. She told students that the veterans they were about to interview were "living history."

Chino Valley Unified School District Board President Irene Hernandez-Blair encouraged students to ask how they could be of service to the veterans.

Among the other dignitaries attending the event were CVUSD Superintendent Wayne Joseph, Chino Police Chief and Don Lugo graduate Karen Comstock, Chino City Councilmember Eunice Ulloa, and Wes Simmons of the Chino Police Department. A special guest was Gold Star Mother Maria Simpson of Chino, whose son, Marine Lance Cpl. Abraham Simpson, died in November 2004 in a battle in Iraq.

Ms. Ragsdale said the meaning of the oral history project really hit home for her a couple of years ago when Air Force veteran William Davis of Ontario said it was the first time he had ever been thanked for his service in Vietnam. "That's why you see a lot of guys tear up, because they've never been thanked," Mr. Davis said at this year's event.

“I think it’s really interesting,” Don Lugo student Tristan Torres said. “It opens your eyes to what it’s like for veterans. They had a job to do.”