

A "Coin Ceremony" to Honor Student-veterans at Green River Community College and its Partnership with VFW Post 1741 of Auburn, Washington

By Jesse Jose *A Cup O' Kapeng Barako*

Note: This story was originally written for my hometown paper, the Auburn

Reporter

and for

VFW

(Veterans of Foreign)

Wars Magazine

, a national publication for veterans, and I wish it to share it with all my "Kapeng Barako" readers, world-wide.

"Coin Ceremony" Honors Student-veterans - MabuhayRadio

Written by Jesse Jose

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**I
t's called the "Coin Ceremony."**

A pizza luncheon actually, held annually, at Green River Community College of Auburn, Washington.

It's more than a luncheon, it's a celebration in honor of student veterans of GRCC and VFW Post 1741.

"At this yearly event," said Timm Lovitt, the Director of Veterans Affairs at the college, "we have some big-named speakers come and talk about the importance of military service ... and to give all of the student veterans, who have not yet received a GRCC Challenge Coin to thank them for all they have given," said Timm Lovitt, the Director of Veterans Services at the college.

This year's guest speaker was Bill Pelozza, the former commander of VFW Post 1741 of Auburn, Washington and member of the town's city council. Special guests who were in attendance were officers of the VFW Post 1741 that include Pete Lewis, the former mayor of the city of Auburn; Bob Newman, the Post's historian; John Ely, the Post's service officer; Jesse Jose, the Post's surgeon; Mike Sepal, the Post's former vice commander; and Joe Audino, a Navy WWII/Korean war Navy veteran and Cuban crisis veteran and a prospective member of 1741.

Dr. Eileen Ely, the president of the college and Dr. Deb Casey, the vice president of student affairs also spoke at this event. In attendance were 30 student veterans of the college. Pete Lewis presented the ceremonial coins to all the veterans in attendance and thank you-for-your-service hugs were given by Dr. Ely and Dr. Casey at the end of ceremonial event.

A CEREMONY TO CELEBRATE A PARTNERSHIP:

"It's a great way for us," said Lovitt, "to honor the men and women who have served. This year we thought it would be cool to combine the VFW 1741 pizza lunch with the ceremony and bring these two groups together to celebrate the partnership we have and promote goodwill in this festive event."

Lovitt, a former Army sergeant who saw combat tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, said "VFW Post 1741 supports the student veterans in several ways."

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How?

"The first," he said, "is the annual scholarships the Post sponsors. Each year the Post sponsors two student veterans, soon to be three, a scholarship that helps out with their books and other school supplies.

The recipients are also offered a free membership to the Post and that has been a pretty successful in drawing new members out to 1741."

"The second is that the Post hosts a monthly pizza lunch for the student veterans. The first Friday of every month the Post buys several pizzas and we encourage our student veterans to come and meet with each other. I provide a large space for the meeting on main campus and we draw about 30 people each time." Lovitt said.

"And this raises awareness about the current events and activities, as well as encourages the students to interact with VFW Post 1741."

The Auburn Post and GRCC have been partnering for the past three years, said Lovitt. However, it has just recently been seeing the fruits of the labor for the past nine months.

"During this time," Lovitt said, "we have seen new student veterans step forward as Post officers, an increase in the number of scholarships awarded, the creation of a SVA (Student Veterans of America) chapter, and a more student veteran participation in post activities."

"And that includes these pizza lunches," he added.

The SVA is a national non-profit organization created to help provide help and guidance to student veterans organization in higher education. The relationship between the VFW and the SVA dates back to the founding of the SVA in January 2008 and was made official on January 3, 2013 with a signing of a MOU (Memorandum of Understanding) between the SVA and the VFW.

This memorandum provide opportunities for the VFW and SVA to pool their resources and help veterans and service members to overcome many challenges, find strength in camaraderie and provide expanded programs for veterans on college campuses nationwide.

Because of this memorandum, there are now 7,200 VFW posts and 1,200 VA-accredited claims service officers, and SVA chapters located on more than 700 college and university campuses, nationwide.

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HOW THE PARTNERSHIP BEGAN:

In his speech, Bill Peloza related how this partnership between VFW 1741 and GRCC came into being. "Approximately, six years ago," he said, "Mike Sepal, as VFW 1741 vice commander, and I, as post commander discussed ways and means of connecting with the GRCC's veteran activities. Mike made contact with the Veterans Office at GRCC."

"I am also familiar with GRCC," Peloza said. "I've had connections here when I worked for the Boeing Company."

What came next from this initial contact was the creation of the GRCC Veterans Office Relief Fund, and VFW Post 1741's initial funding with "seed funds" of \$500.00.

Tyler Oliver, a five-year Army Iraq war veteran and now the president of GRCC's Veterans Club and Adjutant for Post 1741, thanked the Post that he was able to "make all ends meet financially."

Oliver said that that he was the "recipient of a clerical error on the part of the VA and it caused me to go without benefits for almost three months, something that I have only now started to overcome."

"These past two quarters at GRCC, I received a general veteran scholarship, funded in part by the VFW 1741 ... and this," Oliver pointed out, "has given me a safety net of sorts, allowing me to purchase my school supplies."

Bill Peloza said that the Veteran's Lunch Pizza Program was started because "we wanted a connection with student veterans at GRCC. We wanted to recruit new candidates into the VFW program."

This initial funding has grown in a positive way to help veterans between paydays and other emergencies. "Post 1741 was exceedingly happy to assist," said Peloza. "Why? Because that is the mission of VFW. Help another veteran!"

"Three years ago," Peloza said, "we initiated our first Post 1741 GRCC \$1,500.00 veterans

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scholarship. On the second year, we added a second \$1,500.00 scholarship. At our recent May monthly meeting, we approved to award a third \$1,500.00 scholarship for 2014. In addition, the veteran awardee is given a Lifetime VFW Post lifetime membership.

"The monies that support the Veterans Relief Fund," said Pelozza, "are gained by VFW Poppy Drives in the Auburn community.

MANY OTHER COMMUNITY ENDEAVORS OF VFW 1741:

Pelozza also mentioned that VFW Post 1741 sponsor Sports, Eagle Boy and Girl Scout programs and Youth Essay Scholarship Programs. Plus a community Flag Program. "If we see a worn or torn 3x5 American flag," he said, "we replace it for free and give the receiver an envelope and ask them to make a conscionable donation to the Auburn Food Bank in Post 1741's name."

For these community endeavors, Pelozza said that the Auburn Post was recognized with a VFW National Award and that award is "proudly displayed in our Post."

Pelozza concluded his eloquent speech saying that Auburn VFW Post was designated an 'All American Post' in 2011/2012 by the National VFW headquarters and "is very honored to be associated with GRCC and will continue to assist veterans in our community."

"Thank you for allowing us to tell our important story and be part of this 2014 Coin Ceremony celebration. God Bless our military branches and those who have served and are serving our country. Freedom is not free!"

That VFW adage is true: No one does more for veterans. VFW Post 1741 is out front, marching on, serving its veterans and its Auburn community.

As Frank Bannister, the current commander of the Auburn Post, puts it, "The future of our nation and VFW rest in the hands of the talented young men and women present at the ceremony," emphasizing the point that "America and the City of Auburn have a bright future" because of them.

PS: Thank you for reading this piece, Dear Readers. I am a proud active member of this Post, and for all the things that we do for fellow veterans and for our community.

That's all.

JJ

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