

News

(VIDEO) West Morris' 'A Call to Courage' remembers Cpl. Jamie Smith and other fallen heroes

 Mkitchin / By MARK KITCHIN Staff Writer

 10.08.19

WASHINGTON TWP. - Heroes who died in service of the country were in the spotlight last week at West Morris Central High School.

Students honored graduates who made the ultimate sacrifice in the service of their country, and also spent time talking about their qualities and importance.

The week culminated on Friday with an assembly, "A Call to Courage," honoring the memories of five soldiers, including Private First Class Stanley Pfrommer, class of 1962; Lt. Allison Spiers Berry, class of 1964; Sgt. First Class Larry Maysey, class of 1965; Private First Class John Lindaberry, class of 1966; and Cpl. James E. Smith, class of 1990.

Smith, who was killed on Oct. 3, 1993, during a raid in Somalia, was portrayed in the 2001 film, "Black Hawk Down."

He was part of a force of 120 Army Rangers including members of the elite Delta Force, who staged a raid to capture Somali warlord Mohammed Adid. When a Black Hawk helicopter was shot down, Smith was one of the first Rangers to arrive to secure the site and rescue its survivors. A bullet struck his thigh and severed his femoral artery while he was helping another Ranger.

The other Rangers would not leave him behind but could not rescue him before he bled to death. He was posthumously awarded a Bronze Star with Valor Device and Oak Leaf Cluster in addition to a Purple Heart.

Gov. Phil Murphy has proclaimed Oct. 3 as a day in honor of Smith. In his honor the high school has held assemblies and not only talked about his exploits but the qualities of courage.

"Jamie would have thought it was okay," said Debbie Gonzalez, one of Smith's his former teachers. "He wasn't shy. He didn't like a big fuss. Jamie was a person of the community. He would have wanted the football players to have their shirts on. Make it not about him but about groups. The state recognized Jamie and they made it the day so the (school) administration decided this is something significant and we can do this. We can make this a moment to honor him."

Lessons Of Courage

The staff also made it a teachable moment as many classes wove the issues of courage, bravery and vulnerability into their programs.

"We were studying courage in psychology," said senior Darcy Caracciolo. "We learned that fear is the kick starter for courage. You can't have fear without courage. A lot of people believe the courage is being fearless. Really courage is having a lot of fear for something and deciding to do it anyway."

Students were particularly effected because the veterans who were killed in action weren't much older than them.

"Usually we feel distanced from it," senior Breanne Apostolico said. "We don't know many people that are in the military but when you are in a situation where its close to someone, you can see how it affects people."

The English and history classes also were involved in studying courage.

Some English classes were given clips of Brenee Brown's movie "A Call to Courage" which included Teddy Roosevelt's famous "Man in the Arena" speech. The teachers created a lesson which had excerpts and then reflection questions such as: What does it mean to dare greatly and what does courage look like?

Other history and English classes examined an article that explained Smith's actions, Mogadishu and the time period to put everything into context.

"Whatever history you are doing at that time would have some connection with who was courageous and what did courage look like in this time period," Gonzalez said. "Some also looked at why people did not have courage and what got in the way of people standing up and make a difference."

The school remembered two veterans a day during the first three days of morning announcements. On Thursday, which was Jamie Smith Day, members of the American Veterans Association of Washington Township Post 1776 came to the cafeteria during lunch time to talk to students about the sacrifices of Jamie Smith and those like him.

"We had the vets together and there were a tremendous amount of students that came down and talked to them," Gonzalez said. "I was tremendously encouraged by the outpouring of students."

The assembly on Friday was solemn and poignant. Smith's sister, Stephanie, and brothers, Matt and Tom, were in attendance. Gonzalez offered riveting comments about Smith. She kept in touch with him, receiving letters from him weeks before he died. Some of the letters she recovered from her basement only last week.

"It was karma that I kept those," Gonzalez said. "It's been through several moves. I don't know how many times the basement was flooded and things had to get thrown away yet these things survived in a plastic box."

Gonzalez shared memories of Smith as a student that must have resonated with this year's senior class. She also shared the feelings she had the day after Smith was killed 26 years ago.

"He is worthy of that (being honored)," Gonzalez said during her speech. "I don't say that because of the way he died. I say that because of the way he lived. He was a big brother, good son, hard working, persistent. He played hard, smiled hard, laughed hard. He was a human being, a mensch, a person who has integrity and honor."

Hours later all the fallen heroes were honored one last time with a proclamation by Mayor Matt Murello before the start of West Morris homecoming game against Northern Highlands.