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High School graduations take on a new meaning after Operation Recognition

By Dr. Susan Salcido, Santa Barbara County Superintendent of Schools

As I think ahead to high school graduations this spring, I can't help but feel the significance and impact of what these ceremonies mean to the graduates, families, and guests, especially after experiencing graduation through the eyes of those who waited more than 65 years to take part.

Last week, in an inaugural, first-time ceremony hosted by the Santa Barbara County Education Office, seven veterans were provided with their high school diplomas, some after waiting over 65 years. In our Operation Recognition graduation, five veterans of World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War—men who put their lives on the line in defense of our country before they were old enough to finish high school—received their high school diplomas. Two others were awarded diplomas posthumously, and were represented by their proud families.

The event was filled with pomp and circumstance, with an Honor Guard marching to show the colors, with live musicians performing in honor of the graduates, veterans donning caps and gowns, and all of us beaming with pride as a united community supporting veterans and our country. Superior Court Judge Michael Carrozzo, himself a veteran, provided special comments showcasing the value of sacrifice, honor, and duty that were so central to the lives of all these men.

The venue was packed to every corner, with thrilled and solemn supporters who knew more than anyone what this ceremony meant to those being honored.

While the ceremony as a whole was impactful, it was the videos of each veteran that seemed to strike the deepest chord among those who saw them. These videos showcased each graduate as a young man, serving in his respective military branch, and relating the multitude of honors and medals each received. The videos provided each graduate with the opportunity to say

what it meant to him personally to be receiving a high school diploma after all this time. To all, it meant completing a significant piece of their lives that they had felt was missing up to this point.

This graduation was our attempt to provide a tangible acknowledgement of our gratitude. Those of us who participated felt so deeply honored to be able to thank these very brave men for their service to our country.

It's difficult to convey the sense of wonder and joy that filled the auditorium that day, and how much it reinforced the deep significance of these ceremonies.

As we look ahead to the season of high school graduations throughout Santa Barbara County, I hope that all of us who take part, whether graduate, guest, teacher, or community member, know that we're participating in something meaningful and impactful. The Operation Recognition graduation added a new layer of significance, and demonstrated vividly that a high school diploma can continue to hold deep meaning decades after it is attained. The distinguished veterans who received their diplomas last week inspire all of us and help remind us that a diploma is a true and well-earned source of pride and accomplishment.

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