Susan J. Rheems' first annual salute to veterans pays tribute to nation's heroes

Matt Hinshaw/The Daily Courier
Prescott Mayor Marlin Kuykendall talks about the history of Veterans day while the Missing Man Table sits quiet and empty Friday evening during the Susan J. Rheem Day Center's Veteran's Celebration and Appreciation in Prescott.

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By Nanci Hutson

PRESCOTT - Sitting at a table in the Susan J. Rheems Adult Day Care Center decorated in red, white and blue with an American flag behind her chair, 98-year-old client Ruth Deany said she was "surprised" to be treated to such a special occasion.

About 20 veterans, family members and civic leaders participated in the agency's inaugural salute to veterans on Friday night, Nov. 6. The agency's two other centers in Prescott Valley and Cottonwood held similar services last week.

"I think it's wonderful. I was so surprised. It's so thoughtful," said Deany who attended with her daughter, Patricia.

Deany served for two years during World War II as a member of Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Services (WAVES) at the naval station in Great Lakes, Illinois.

Through her years of voluntary military service, the now-widow met her husband of 62 years, Leo, an Army veteran assigned to the Aleutian Islands. Her daughter teases that they fell in love on a blind date.

To this day, Deany said she still corresponds with some of her remaining WAVES sisters through a round-robin letter-sharing project.

"I think it's great they honor the veterans," her daughter said. "It was a very important, memorable, part of their lives."

Her mother nodded with a wide smile.

Partnering with Granite Mountain Home Care and Hospice as well as the VA and local veterans' organizations, the Susan J. Rheems' staff organized an Italian dinner and tribute to men and women from all branches of the military. Prescott Mayor Marlin Kuykendall presented a proclamation and the Prescott Valley VFW Post conducted an "honor pinning" ceremony.
Kuykendall shared the origins of Veterans Day, a national holiday that dates back to World War I. Today it is intended to recognize veterans of all wars.

Northern Arizona Veteran Affairs Health Care Systems Acting Chief of Social Work Ruby Rideout shared information about some of the agency’s non-institutional programs, including its medical foster care program that enables veterans to live in a home-based setting with live-in caregivers. She said she is championing these lesser-known services so as to honor veterans with medical options that respect their wishes and meet their needs.

A 97-year-old World War II veteran, whose caretakers asked he not be named, presented a stirring rendition of the Pledge of Allegiance and recited a short poem as a tribute to those who sacrificed all.

The VFW Post set up a Missing Man Table in the rear of the dining area to honor all those who never came home and whose families are still seeking answers to their fate.

For Nancy Quitney, whose husband, Lester, 84, was unable to attend, said such a commemoration was "wonderful" because it recognized that no veteran contribution is ever too small.

"I think it's so gracious of everyone to do this," said Quitney whose husband was in the Air Force between 1952 and 1954.

"He was the one fixing the jets so they could fly," said Quitney who showed off a now-yellowed photograph of her husband in uniform.

Granite Mountain Home Care and Hospice Community Liaison Debbie McLane read a poem, "I Am a Veteran" that paid homage to heroes who are our neighbors, our high school boyfriend or girlfriends, our barber, school teacher or car mechanic.

In all cases, McLane said these are people of great character and humility who deserve this nation's continued gratitude, as freedom is not free.

"To me, Veterans Day is every day," McLane declared.

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