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SATURDAY, APRIL 14

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Souderton Independent

Spring-Ford Reporter

Springfield Sun

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AGE HAS

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### Students learn experience just may be the best teacher

By: Patrick Cobbs, Staff writer  
04/04/2007

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Souderton Area High School students sat at tables with seniors at SAAC last week to get first-hand accounts of what life during WWII was really like.

reflected together on the show following a cheese steak lunch.

And it's meant something special to the students as well who, Social Studies Teacher Karen Manno said, were looking forward to it all week. In addition, "the timing was really great because we are all [studying] World War II right now," she said.

The event was the second such partnership among Souderton schools, Montgomery County Community College, which helped to arrange the performance, and SAAC. The first was in February, when an African dance group called Kulu Mele visited the center through MCCC and 100 students from the Souderton Charter School Collaborative joined the seniors. It was also special for EBZB when they found out they would be performing for a mixed-age audience at SAAC.

"We were delighted because an intention with this show was to help later generations learn from the ones that came before," said performer Serena Eberhard.

The troupe eased the audience back to that time of great character, fear and change. Propaganda posters admonished citizens to be on guard and frugal, and above all patriotic. Unprecedented numbers of volunteers joined the armed services, women took leadership roles on the home front and also in military capacities, and the white-dominated establishment of the time slowly began to allow African American soldiers more prominent roles in the military and recognize them for their vital contributions.

But little could capture the gravity of a time when, from the Nazi invasion of Poland in 1939 to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 to the armistice in 1945, 48 million people were killed by the war. Making that real for the 155 high school students could only come from the people who went through it. People like Vernon Lewis of Lansdale.

Lewis provided a serious message and picture of war. He earned 10 WWII battle ribbons for his service on the U.S.S. McGowan destroyer in the Pacific. In one exchange an explosion rocked the deck and a piece of shrapnel sent him flying. Were it not for his "Mae West Vest," the life preserver all the sailors wore, he might not be around to share things today. Miraculously the vest stopped the shrapnel from doing serious damage.

"There is no win in war," he said. "If politicians would have to fight a war there wouldn't be any," he said.

Other local residents reflected on their own experiences during that time as well. Joyce Koehler of Perkaskie recalled when she was a girl and her mother had the duty, one night a week, of keeping watch in the old tower at the Souderton American Legion for enemy planes.

"Today it just makes you wonder how many airplanes would come in to little old Souderton," she said. Nancy Morris of Harleysville remembered saving the foil from chewing gum rappers and other sources to donate to the war effort, and she brought in several copies of old V-mail letters that came home from soldiers. Contrasting markedly to e-mail and text messaging, they were shrunk down copies of letters that soldiers wrote home with some information - like unit location or destinations - blacked out by government censors.

A table full of 10th-graders looked over the small letter in awe.

"So if you had bad handwriting to begin with, the person who will get it isn't going to know what you're saying," sophomore Amanda Gregus commented, referring to the shrunken size. Many students reported some previous exposure to descriptions of life during the war from their grandparents or great-grandparents. One impression that seemed to settle in, both from that source and the day's performance, is how much harder life must have been during that time.

At one table, Charles Moyer of Harleysville and Eugene Urbanek of Hatfield were joined by high school students Laurine Christie, Kaitlin Zane, Melissa Smith, Alyssa Dunn and Chelsea Steever. During the war Moyer served as a combat engineer in France and Urbanek served on a "John Wayne Special" Navy mine sweeper in the Pacific Ocean. They described some of the details about that life with the balance of a storyteller's humor never far off.

"The first words I heard when we got in the service was 'the reason you're here is because you have a strong back and a weak mind, and he was right,' Moyer said to laughter. Of course there was a lighter side to home life during that era, too, and the students who shared the table with Ali and Jinnie Myers, who have been married for 56 years, learned a little bit about that. The table of six girls in their junior year took in some practical advice from the couple. One hot topic was how to get your man.

"If you have a guy who wants a girl's phone number, you offer it but give your own and that's how you have a 50-year marriage," Jordan Bideau said, summarizing the lesson.

All Myers did serve in the war but he had the good fortune of beginning his active service in Guam

Cloudy 55°

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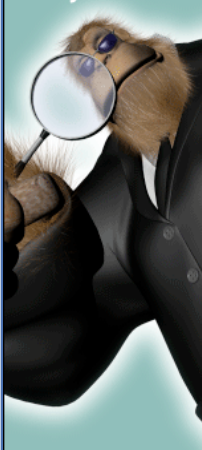


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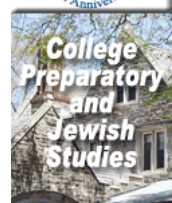
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just after the Japanese surrender. He spoke of trading American cigarettes with Japanese soldiers coming through his military base and managing the Beer Garden social club. One of the major challenges to that was fighting the large rats that fed off the trash of the club and thrived in the warm climate.

"That's his war stories, battling the rats," his wife said. The students sensed there was well-tested wisdom at their table as the conversation drifted across the subjects of war to romance to living and growing up. Junior Alex Shinnars even asked about driving tips for her upcoming license test. In that way the get-together soon highlighted more commonalities between young and old than the oft-referred-to "generation gap."

"I'd take this over a textbook any day," Jordan Bideau said when everyone started packing up to go.

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