Stockton Becomes First University in the Region to Install Honor Chair Remembering POW/MIAs

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Galloway, NJ - A light shines 24/7 on an empty honor chair outside the Veterans Lounge at

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Members of Stockton's Student Veterans Organization (SVO), Veteran Advisory Board, faculty, staff and the community attended the dedication to show their support for those who served. Frank Cerreto, professor of Mathematics, sang the national anthem, and The Stockton Faculty Band played music from the Vietnam Era.

"From its founding, Stockton was run and led by veterans," said Kesselman. He remembered the late Peter Mercado, a former dean at Stockton who was a Marine Vietnam veteran and received the Bronze Star, the Purple Heart, the Combat Action Ribbon and over 10 additional citations and awards. "He was the first major force in my life," he said.

If it weren't for Stockton's veterans, we wouldn't be what we are today, added Kesselman, noting that veterans are a part of Stockton's entire history.

Forty-seven years ago on March 4, Marco Polo Smigliani, an America's Patriot Veterans advocate and a member of Stockton's Veteran Advisory Board, was in Vietnam's A Shau Valley. He shared the story of an ambush where four of his fellow marines were killed. "I took an AK-47 round and I patched myself up, and I saw my friend Billy Norton laying on his belly. I went over there to help him and an RPG went off and almost blew my arm off," he said.

"The reason I'm sharing this with you today is because this is what it's really all about. You see all these men and women. It's difficult to try to bring you to that terrible environment that we were in 47 years ago today," he said.

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He explained the slice of lemon for the bitter fate, the pinch of salt for the tears shed and a burning candle for hope.

The community gathered around an unoccupied chair for the formal dedication of the honor chair.

The chair, reclaimed from a yard sale, was sanded, but the scars are too deep to disappear, explained Berenotto. "Instead of casting it aside, we accept the scars, for they are not flaws. They don't define it. They give it character. Instead of discarding it, we give it a new purpose," he said.

That purpose is to give daily reminders that we cannot forget those who did not make it home.

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