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Mt. Paran students honor veterans

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Nov 10, 2019



Students and faculty at Mount Paran to honor over 100 representatives from all five American military branches.

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Students and faculty at Mount Paran Christian School in Kennesaw gathered in the gymnasium to honor over 100 representatives from all five American military branches.

During the school's annual Veterans Day program, vets, active troops and family members clutching portraits marched across the basketball court as students from kindergartners through high schoolers cheered and waved American flags.

Following the procession, members of the band and chorus performed patriotic music before a keynote address from Mel Pender, a gold medalist and Vietnam veteran.

Sophomore Sammi Ortega said it was an inspiring way to spend a Wednesday morning.

"I feel like the school really needed to hear that and just know their stories and what they do for our country," she said. "Our world is always falling to pieces, and having people that go out and fight for the country they love, they're wanting to put it back together when others tear it down."

Pender, who was born in Atlanta in 1937, told the children he always knew he wanted to serve and be like his father, who was in the Navy during World War II.

He enlisted at 17 years old, and it wasn't until he joined the Army that he learned he had a talent for running.

The Army sent him to train for the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, where he placed sixth in the 100-meter dash.

After competing, Pender decided to go to Officer Candidate School and was then deployed to Vietnam.

"When I was sitting in the foxholes in Vietnam and looking up at the sky, I would always wonder if I would make it home to see my family," he told the Mount Paran students. "I prayed so hard. I said, 'God, please let me come home.' I've seen so much in the war when I served my country in Vietnam. My wife told me not to say this because I get choked up when I say it, I had a young man die in my arms. He wasn't a black kid, he was a white kid, but he was American. It doesn't matter when you fight in a war what color or religion you are, you fight for freedom and this great country that we live in."

While he was fighting, the Army pulled him out again to train for the 1968 Mexico City Olympics.

"I refused to go. I did not want to leave my men. These kids were 18, 19, 21 years old. I was 27 or 28. But they said 'You have to go, Mel, you've been requested to go back and train for the 1968 games.' And when I left, I promised my men I was going to win a gold medal."

Pender again made it to the finals for the 100-meter dash, but his medal came as part of the world record-setting 4x100-meter relay team.

“I thought my Olympic days, my running days were over, but God gave me a chance to come back at age 31 to run in the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City,” he said. “I didn’t run track until I was 25 years old. And I realized that God had given me a gift.”

Following his win, Pender went back to Vietnam for another tour of duty, where he was awarded a Bronze Star. He would later serve as track coach at West Point before retiring as a captain after 21 years of service.

Since his discharge, Pender has stayed active in sports and community affairs. Now 82, he spends much of his free time as a motivational speaker for young people.

His message for the Mount Paran student body: Embrace diversity and come together as one to help solve the nation’s problems.

“We have all people from all different nationalities in the world that make this country the greatest country in the world,” he said. “America has always been great, and what makes it great is when we come together as one people. There’s no reason why we shouldn’t have diversity in this country. I’ve seen so much and I’ve sacrificed so much as a black man in this country. I just want everybody here in this room to know that we are one people, God made us one people. We may be different color, different religion, but we live in the greatest country in the world.”