

Bikers: Benefit ride helps BC3 student-veterans change gears

Scholarship “important to get veterans back on their feet,” American Legion Rider says

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A grouping of Butler County American Legion Riders travel along Highfield Road in Lyndora for the final mile of their 110-mile trip that helps to raise funds for Butler County Community College student-veterans.

(Butler, PA) Proceeds from a nearly seven-hour motorcycle ride Saturday can make the difference of a lifetime for servicemen and servicewomen who will attend Butler County Community College, and will continue to assist student-veterans long after the lifetimes of the fundraisers’ participants, the president of the Butler County American Legion Riders’ said.

The ride benefits Butler County veterans, and supports the group’s mission of reaching a \$10,000 endowment level with the BC3 Education Foundation Inc., which would make the annual Butler County American Legion Riders Veterans Incentive Scholarship perpetual, Dennis Christie said.

“We started the scholarship here three years ago to leave our legacy,” Christie said. “If the riders dissolve down the road – hopefully we are always here – but that scholarship will always be there for the veterans, regardless of whether we are here or not. That is one reason we started it.”

Approximately 60 riders and 40 passengers left the VA Butler Healthcare Center at 11:15 a.m., in a steady rain and driving off on a 110-mile trip with visits to VFW Post 7376 in Saxonburg, VFW Post 4843 in Ford City, VFW Post 7073 in Parker, American Legion Post 243 in West Sunbury and American Legion Post 778 in Lyndora.

Among them were Gary Eshenbaugh and Carol Hazlett; Randy Spencer; Bob and Ella Hicks; Jim Miller; and Dan McLaughlin, an Army veteran whose son, Lt. Col. Michael McLaughlin, 44, was killed by a suicide bomber in January 2006 in Ramadi, while serving in his first deployment to Iraq during a 26-year career in the Pennsylvania National Guard.

BC3 Class of 2017: Most student-veterans in three years

“This,” McLaughlin said of the ride’s fundraising, “is a way of giving back to the veterans who have served. It’s very important. It shows that the money that we are raising today is going to help out someone who needs help financially and it is going to help them further themselves. It will help them to get a better education, improve their job skills. They will be able to move forward with their life.”

About 150 student-veterans attended BC3 this spring, according to Stella Smith, BC3’s associate director of financial aid and the school’s veterans coordinator. She also serves as adviser to BC3’s Student Veterans Association.

Nearly 55 percent of BC3’s student-veterans are age 30 or older. About 75 percent are male. Roughly 50 percent attend college full-time.

Twenty-six student-veterans graduated in BC3’s Class of 2017, the most in three years, according to Amy Pignatore, director of records and registration. Sixteen were graduated in May 2015 and 15 in May 2016, she said.

“It is nice to see this ride help the people who keep us safe here,” said Eshenbaugh, of Butler, who has worked at the VA for 25 years and whose late father, Russell Eshenbaugh, formerly of Freeport, was a Navy National Guardsman at the end of WW2. Eshenbaugh’s daughter, Alicia Eshenbaugh, is a business management student at BC3, where Eshenbaugh’s ex-wife, Carla, earned a registered nursing degree.

“BC3 puts out knowledgeable students,” said Eshenbaugh, a member of American Legion Post 778. “They really give them a good experience. Their nursing program, what I recall of it, was awesome back then. And I am sure it has expanded since then. BC3 is very important. It is close to home. Looking at it cost-wise, you can live at home and travel to school.”

Ride participant: Son will go to BC3, plans to graduate debt-free

Eshenbaugh’s passenger, Hazlett, of Fenelton, studied business administration at BC3 in the 1990s before pursuing a four-year degree at Point Park College. Her father was in the Army, and her grandfather and uncle in the Navy and Marines, respectively, in World War II.

Her son, Timothy Hazlett, 18, will be a BC3 freshman this fall studying computer information systems.

“He chose BC3 because of the cost,” Hazlett said. “And it is close to home. And he is very excited because when he was talking to his friends at the end of the school year, they were all talking school loans. And what they had to buy. And he said he could go for two years to BC3 and graduate debt-free.”

Staff Sgt. Charles “James” Muehlbronner, a 38-year-old veteran of nine years in the Air Force, became the first BC3 student-veteran to receive the Butler County American Legion Riders Veterans Incentive Scholarship in 2016. Eligible student-veterans must have been honorably discharged, must be taking at least six credits and have a minimum grade-point average of 2.0.

Applications for the 2017 scholarship are being reviewed, said Michelle Jamieson, associate director of the BC3 Education Foundation Inc.

“We are grateful to the Butler County American Legion Riders for creating their scholarship,” Jamieson said. “It is an honor to help deserving student-veterans. BC3 couldn’t do that without the Legion Riders.”

The scholarship “is a wonderful thing for someone who has served the nation,” said Spencer, a Sarver resident whose grandfather fought in World War I and whose father, in the Korean War. “They should have an opportunity like BC3 to get the education and to push forward.”

BC3 an option for retraining, Riders’ president says

Bob Hicks, a Prospect resident who served with the Marines in Vietnam in 1969, echoed Spencer.

“You have to have an education or you won’t get anywhere,” said Hicks, a member of American Legion Post 778. “That’s all there is to it.”

BC3, named by Victory Media as a Military Friendly institution for four consecutive years, is the only college or university whose student-veterans benefit from the Butler County American Legion Riders Veterans Incentive Scholarship, Christie said. BC3 is also the only college or university whose student-veterans are eligible for emergency funds from endowed accounts created by American Legion Post 778 and by American Legion Post 117 in Butler.

“A lot of times they need an education just to get a job in society,” Christie said of returning veterans. “What they were trained to do in the military may not fit in society. They may need to be retrained and BC3 is an avenue they can use.”

Miller, past president and past vice president of the Butler County American Legion Riders, said the scholarship for BC3 student-veterans is “really important.”

“We ask our veterans to do a lot,” said Miller, of Chicora, whose father was in the Army Air Forces during World War II. “Over the years I have learned how much they have sacrificed, and how much their families have sacrificed, as they did their job. When they come home, we sort of

forget about it. A lot of the guys who get shipped over now are Reservists. So they are taking a cut in pay when they get deployed. So the families are suffering. Then they come back and they need education.

“The scholarship is really important to get veterans back on their feet, help them to get decent-paying jobs, which are hard to find nowadays.”

Miller’s son, Travis, studied marketing at BC3 and his daughter, Aletha, pursued nursing.

“BC3’s nursing program is excellent, best in the country,” said Miller, of American Legion Post 778. “We heard good things about it whenever she went, and we heard great things about it after she went through. She’s got a great job through UPMC, so I am very satisfied with Butler County Community College.”

Four vets: Today’s economy requires education

An hour before the 100 riders made their turn onto Highfield Road in Lyndora en route to the pavilion below American Legion Post 778, Bill Holt and nearly 60 others were preparing for 50-50 raffles, auctions and a chance at a 2017 Harley-Davidson Street Glide valued at \$22,000.

Veterans Holt, Howard Pfeifer, Sam Lovric and Sal DiMaria said today’s veterans do not return to an economy where family-sustaining jobs are abundant for those without a degree or certificate.

“If you don’t have a good education,” said Holt, who served in the Marines from 1968 to 1970, “you are maybe going to be stuck in one of those dead-end jobs for a long time.”

It’s the same advice Holt – who like Lovric and DiMaria is a member of American Legion Post 117 – would give to his stepson, Kirk Gibson, a 21-year-old BC3 metrology student from Herman.

“He is doing very well,” Holt said, “and has a tentative job offer for a very good position after graduation.”

“Somebody should help them”

The widespread manufacturing jobs available to workers without a degree or certificate upon his return from the Merchant Marine in World War II no longer exist, said Pfeifer, 93, of Wexford.

“You absolutely have to be trained to do something,” he said. “You can’t be educated enough. For those who enlist, and volunteer, and give up a good portion of the prime of their life fighting for our country, we should and can help the people who do that through educating them.”

After he was discharged after serving in the Army from 1965 to 1967, including all of 1966 in Vietnam, “You could get a job without having to go to college,” said Lovric, of Butler.

Today’s student-veterans, he said, “should pursue “as much education as they can get.”

The missions of the Butler County American Legion Riders “is the way it should be,” Lovric said. “Anything that benefits someone coming out of the service. Somebody should help them.”

“It’s all a matter of giving back, isn’t it?” DiMaria, of Butler, said of the Butler County American Legion Riders Veterans Incentive Scholarship.

“It is fellow veterans’ ways of helping our brothers. … Higher education in any form, whether it is a two-year degree or a four-year degree, can only serve to improve your chances of a better life.”

DiMaria served in the Air Force from 1965 to 1969, including two years in Vietnam.

“There are no guarantees, but higher education does improve your chances of a better life,” he said. “And for the veterans and their dependents, that is something that we desire to happen.”