

VFW Rewards Teachers who ‘Invest’ in Students

VFW bestowed awards upon three teachers at this year’s National Convention for generating patriotism and good citizenship values in their classrooms

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VFW’s commitment to recognizing educators who provide outstanding patriotic lessons to their students is a never-ending labor of love. Every year at its national convention, VFW awards the top three teachers an all-expenses paid trip to the host city, a certificate, a financial honorarium and the opportunity to explain why they do what they do.

EMILY EZELL

Grade level K-5 | Cowan Elementary School | Cowan, Tenn.

Emily Ezell, a third-grade teacher at Cowan Elementary School in Cowan, Tenn., about 100 miles southwest of Nashville, has produced a self-written patriotic play called “This Is Our Land.” The production has been performed annually by her students for the past 15 years.

At the beginning of the school year, students practice and research the people they portray in the play. The performance incorporates the third-grade students’ curriculum and gives veterans from the community a chance to share their experiences.

Kimberly King, commander of VFW Post 10904 in Manchester, Tenn., was invited for last year’s Veterans Day performance.

“When the play began, I was amazed at the quality of it all,” King said. “Throughout the play, many old and new patriotic songs were used and played between scenes. The mix was exceptionally well done.”

King said many patriotic subjects were covered, including the meaning behind the U.S. flag

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colors, why the Constitution is important and the purpose of the Secret Service.

“One of the most important investments I choose to make in their lives is to instill patriotism,” Ezell said. “I feel it is my duty to foster a love of country, as well as help them develop an understanding of how and why our country is the greatest in the world.”

Ezell said she, at first, “struggled” with how she could serve America after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Ezell later realized she had the perfect opportunity in front of her — the classroom.

“I knew that I could make a difference if I could teach them to love our country and honor and respect those who serve,” Ezell said.

Ezell added all VFW-awarded funds will go toward future productions of the play.

“I am blessed beyond measure to have the VFW’s support,” Ezell said.

SARA GIBSON COAN

Grade level 6-8 | Caroline Middle School | Milford, Va.

Sara Gibson Coan, a seventh-grade history teacher at Caroline Middle School in Milford, Va., helped lead the school’s history club in creating the Caroline County (Va.) Korean War Memorial.

After learning that the 38th parallel crossed the school’s front lawn, Coan’s students presented the idea of creating a memorial for veterans of the “forgotten war” to school officials. The 38th parallel, of course, is the marked border between North and South Korea and location of the two countries’ demilitarized zone.

Her students originally came up with the idea to place a plaque on the marked parallel, but ended up getting a garden approved by the school administration. Coan said students designed all of the 38-foot-by-38-foot garden.

“They researched plants from North and South Korea that we could put in the garden,” Coan said, “and they even suggested we have concrete instead of mulch for our older veterans to get around the garden easier.”

Because of her dedications to Korean War veterans, Coan was selected as an honorary member of the Korean War Veterans Association in Richmond, Va., about 40 miles south of Milford. She also has led field trips to local military museums, including the Vietnam War Foundation in Ruckersville, Va.

As a part of her students’ curriculum, Coan has invited local veterans to ceremonies at the middle school, which gave history club students the opportunity to interview the veterans.

“Oftentimes, my vets ask about my kids, even when they have made it to high school,” Coan said. “My kids constantly ask me to bring [the veterans] back for a visit. It warms your heart.”

Coan said the school’s award is going toward the History Club fund, which will help maintain the Korean War Memorial Garden, and that she is “blown away” by the VFW’s \$1,000 contribution to the school.

“It will help us greatly in field trips, luncheons, interview days and ceremonies for our favorite people, our veterans,” Coan said.

Coan, who also received \$1,000, said her award is going toward a Vietnam trip. She said she already has visited several battlefields in Europe, such as the ones in Normandy, Berlin and Bastogne, as well as South Korea.

“To see the 38th parallel in Korea, and cross it... for a brief moment, was amazing,” Coan said. “My next dream location would be Vietnam to see the Cu Chi tunnels, Hanoi and the former city of Saigon. To be able to see the locations of these important places I teach about means everything to me.”

MICHAEL RAUENHORST

Grade level 9-12 | North Pole High School | North Pole, Alaska

Michael Rauenhorst, an Air Force veteran and aerospace science teacher at North Pole High School in North Pole, Alaska, encourages community volunteerism and leads about 100 students in the school’s Air Force Junior Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (JROTC) program.

In 2017, Rauenhorst’s students logged in more than 3,100 hours of community service, including conducting 27 color guard events, participating in North Pole community health fairs, helping maintain a local Boy Scout camp and promoting awareness of youth homelessness.

“Community service projects are a part of the JROTC program,” said Rauenhorst, a life member of VFW Post 10029 in North Pole, Alaska, some 20 miles southeast of Fairbanks. “It really opens the eyes of a lot of the cadets.”

While in the Air Force, Rauenhorst served in Saudi Arabia with the 1701st Provisional Air Refueling Wing and in Egypt with the 1704th Provisional Air Refueling Wing during the Persian Gulf War.

Now, as a retired Air Force colonel and JROTC instructor, Rauenhorst organizes Curriculum in Action tours, which teach science and encourage citizenship and patriotism,

as well as strengthen student perspectives of aviation and U.S. military history.

“Through that, we use military culture to help facilitate our curriculum,” Rauenhorst said. “It’s pretty cool to expose kids to things they haven’t done before.”

Rauenhorst said all these facets of curriculum are a part of his job description as a JROTC instructor.

“The best way to build a good citizen is to have them prepared for life after high school,” Rauenhorst said. “As a JROTC instructor, we probably spend more time at school than we do with our own families.”

For the Curriculum in Action tours, Rauenhorst has escorted cadets onto military bases, including Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam in Hawaii, as a part of his aviation history curriculum. Rauenhorst said he plans to use the VFW-awarded funds for the club account to help fund future tours.

“I’m very honored for getting this award from VFW,” Rauenhorst said. “It means a lot to the school and the school district to be recognized on a national level. We have a good JROTC program up here, but it’s not just because of me and the cadets. We have tremendous support from the parents and the school’s administration. They take a lot of pride in this award, as well. It reflects our JROTC program up here.”

This article is featured in the October 2018 issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Dave Spiva](#), senior writer, VFW magazine.