

Westies host veterans at Bennett

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By Susan Misur *Special to the Voice*

Saturday's game may not have added a "W" to the West Haven High School boys hockey team's record, but student-athletes, coaches and spectators were victorious in making the day special for local veterans. The match between WHHS and Darien High School at Bennett Rink was billed as the third annual Veteran's Appreciation Day, an event that has become a tradition for Westie hockey players and honors veterans in numerous ways.

The VA Connecticut Healthcare System brought a group of veterans from the West Haven VA campus to the game, while sponsorship proceeds and donations went toward Veteran Angler Charters, a West Haven-based, all-volunteer nonprofit that takes vets with physical and psychological injuries on fishing trips. The West Haven Police Department Color Guard and 102nd Army Reserve Band were on hand, and WHHS players wore camouflage-colored jerseys that were purchased by the Penalty Box Club when the event began a few years ago. Additionally, veterans with valid military IDs were admitted free of charge.

In the days before the game, which No.1-ranked Darien won 2-1, WHHS hockey players also visited with vets at the VA hospital.

"It's our time to remember what they've done for us. We sit in the hospital and talk to guys who were in WWII and the Vietnam War. It's amazing what have to offer us and the history they're sharing," said WHHS hockey coach Joe Morrell.

Veteran Angler Charters is run by two WHHS alumni, siblings

Kathy and Ed Granfield, and organized 27 fishing trips for vets last year in Connecticut, Rhode Island and Massachusetts. Kathy Granfield launched the charity in 2009 after learning about veterans struggling with the transition of coming home from the military. Ed Granfield, also president of Oyster River Petroleum, began helping with fundraising.

Dan Granfield, Ed Granfield's son, helped develop the first Veteran's Appreciation Day in 2012 while he was a WHHS senior and hockey player as a way of fundraising for Veteran Angler Charters. The WHHS athletics department and coaching staff were supportive, and since then, the event has been raising funds for Veteran Angler Charters, while also honoring military members. "We wanted to raise awareness at the high school and raise money for charity, and we thought we could do something together," Ed Granfield said.

Kathy Granfield recalled the team's visit to the VA hospital before the inaugural Veteran's Appreciation Day.

"The kids were talking to a WWII vet, and a hockey player asked how old he was when he landed on the beaches of Normandy. He said he was 18. It was an eye-opening experience for them because that's around the age of these students," she said.

On Saturday, vets from the VA, some who became fixtures at this year's home football games through a program with the West Haven Football Alumni Association, sat behind the rink wall, eyes glued to the ice. Asked what he thought of the WHHS hockey team, WWII veteran and Blue Devils fan Marty exclaimed, "They've gotta be the best."

Morrell said the team plans to continue holding a Veteran's

Appreciation Day annually.

“We’ll be on board as long as I’m there, and we’ll do this for years to come,” he said.