

Butler Rotary salutes leader of BC3 student veterans

“I was terrified to be in normal society again. You get off the bus, you literally land straight from Afghanistan into the states, you see family, and then you’re back in country. You can’t turn that off.” – Daniel J. Egbert, in “Project 22”



(Butler, PA) Three years after his honorable discharge, retired Staff Sgt. James Manning still answers the call.

Sometimes it’s at 2 o’clock in the morning.

“I have lost friends from suicide because of post-traumatic stress disorder from a first deployment,” he says.

That’s why he picks up the receiver.

“You don’t want to answer calls at 2 o’clock in the morning,” Stella Smith says. “But he knows he should.”

As an intelligence analyst who served eight years in the Army and two tours in Iraq, Manning says he can almost guarantee the work he did saved lives.

As president of the Student Veterans Association at Butler County Community College, his mission is to rebuild them.

“He has saved a person’s life just by talking to him,” says Smith, the club’s adviser and associate director of financial aid. “Just by listening to the person.”

On Wednesday, November 9, the Butler AM Rotary Club honored Manning as a Paul Harris Fellow, presenting a \$1,000 donation in his name to the Rotary Foundation, which is celebrating its 100th year this month.

Manning, the only veteran among the Butler AM Rotary Club's seven Paul Harris Fellow recipients in 2016, was selected "for his service to local veterans through his efforts at BC3 and for bringing community awareness to the mental-health issues facing returning veterans," says Jennifer Linn, a Rotary club member and BC3 trustee.

In addition to the physical wounds, it is estimated as many as 400,000 service members live with the invisible wounds of war that include combat-related stress, major depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. Another 320,000 are believed to have experienced a traumatic brain injury while on deployment.

Manning this year organized four campus showings of "Project 22," an April 2015 documentary in which two young combat veterans raise awareness of veteran suicides.

"I dealt with a lot of my demons before I started here at BC3," Manning says.

Now he is helping others deal with theirs.

"You don't think you are as different as you are. But you know there's something different. And I was terrified to see my family." -- **Daniel J. Egbert, in "Project 22"**

An estimated 12 percent of service members or veterans from the first Gulf War suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. That number increases to up to 20 percent for those having served since Sept. 11, 2001.

"A lot of guys when they are first getting out are withdrawn from society and from reaching out to new people," says Manning, 30, of Butler. "In a lot of cases they are somewhat isolated and not talking to other vets to see how other vets are feeling."

Manning works to create social outlets for BC3's student veterans, says Barbara Calvert, an accounting major who served three years in the Navy.

"It's another area where we are not isolating ourselves, because that is a big issue with anyone who has, especially combat-related issues," she says. "You tend to isolate and feel like you are the only one who is going through this, and you realize through talking to the others that you're not. Even if you are just sitting in the room and listening to the conversation between two other fellow service people, you don't actually have to be saying anything, but you can hear that there are other people going through the same thing, and it allows you to open up."

Manning was 20 when he began a 15-month deployment to Mosul in 2006 – "We averaged 130 attacks a month" - followed by a yearlong deployment in Nasiriyah in May 2009.

The memories are forever etched into his mind, and onto his right arm, with tattoos "for eight of the guys I was not successful for," he says.

Five died. Three were severely injured and evacuated by medical helicopter from Iraq.

“You get this huge homecoming and you think it’s gonna be, ‘I’m back.’ But you’re not back. I don’t think you’re ever back.” – Daniel J. Egbert, in “Project 22”

In combat, Manning says, “It’s everybody standing behind each other. It’s important. You have to look out for your buddies because they are going to be looking out for you, and everybody is trying to make sure that everybody comes home. And that’s the key thing for us, just trying to make sure that everybody we take comes home with us.”

BC3 is the college home to 150 student veterans - up from 30 when she began her financial aid job 17 years ago, Smith says. Of those 150, she estimates 51 have served in combat in the post-Sept. 11 era.

Once home, some veterans face another battle - post-traumatic stress disorder.

“You can feel so different,” Manning says. “Anything from anxiety issues to depression to being withdrawn from family and friends and activities that you love, all the way out to suicide.”

Those feelings hit home in “Project 22.”

“We’ve probably had over 100 people see it,” says Dr. Case Willoughby, BC3 vice president for student affairs and enrollment management who has also served as the SVA’s adviser.

Two student veterans sought counseling at VA Butler Healthcare in April after viewing the movie.

“That’s huge,” Willoughby says. “And then the local VA asked (Manning) to bring it to the VA. So he has shown it there, too.”

It is difficult to determine what issues combat veterans may face once home.

“Let alone these two in specific,” Manning says. “They came to the showing and they reached out for help with whatever their personal issues were. They got help, whether it could have been substance abuse or depression all the way up to feeling suicidal.”

“It doesn’t take a hero or it doesn’t take a superman to be there for a friend. You don’t have to be able to know what to say or be able to fix their problems or work it out or show them the light. You just have to be there.” – Doc King, in “Project 22”

Manning, Willoughby and Smith say, is the most proactive and effective president in the eight-year history of the Student Veterans Association.

“He cares deeply about people,” Willoughby says. “I first met him a little over a year ago when he first started working with the Student Veterans Association, and I realized, ‘OK, this is a person who is serious and who is smart and who does what he says he is going to do.’ You meet him and you think, ‘honorable person.’ And you watch the things he keeps doing. And he keeps doing things to help other people. He keeps making decisions to spend time and energy with the

SVA in ways that would help other veterans, help the association, and doesn't leave folks behind."

Manning also served on a student veterans panel as part of BC3's unveiling in June of its Green Zone, a cadre of 24 members of BC3's student affairs office and campus police who have undergone three hours of training, which, Willoughby says, builds a group of people who have more awareness of both the strengths and challenges that student veterans are more likely to have, and assists student veterans in topics ranging from accessing GI benefits to counseling. Most importantly, the Student Veterans Association has become more introspective.

"I wanted to make it more about the veteran and less about the club," Manning says.

The organization now focuses more on making it interesting for veterans to cooperate and to commune, which Calvert says, "is what a lot of us felt was the bigger need. There are 150-some members that attend campus. Maybe some of them have PTSD from wars and are not real social people. He's creating a social outlet for us to get together and to have camaraderie, share stories, and maybe to learn new information from each other about where we can go for improving our lives, not just in school."

The Butler AM Rotary Club is recognizing Manning's work to help others improve their lives.

"Finding him in that moment ... He was there for me through what was the hardest couple of years of my life." – **Doc King, on his friendship with Daniel J. Egbert, in "Project 22"**

Improving student veterans' lives starts, Manning says, starts with their experience at BC3.

"They've recognized the need for their education because a lot of military skills don't carry on into civilian jobs," Manning says. "And even if they do, they're coming out of the military and are not credentialed in anything. These days you have to have a degree or a certificate of some sort to say you know what you are doing in this field and in this position. And these guys have realized, 'Hey, I need to get credentialed so that I can advance and make my life better and the lives of my family members better.'"

Manning holds an associate degree in intelligence operation studies from Cochise College in Arizona.

He also earned two associate degrees from BC3, in criminology and in emergency management and homeland security. The guest student takes courses at the University of Pittsburgh toward a bachelor's degree in administration of justice, which he hopes to obtain by December 2017, and a bachelor's degree in homeland security from Franklin University by the following spring.

"This is terrific on so many levels," says Dr. Nick Neupauer, BC3 president. "Our Student Veterans Association on campus does a great job, leading us toward a three-year recognition of being named a Military-Friendly college. James is a fine gentleman who led troops and now is a leader of our students. And Jennifer (Linn) embodies the dedication of our board of trustees."

The Butler AM Rotary Club also honored as Paul Harris Fellows the following: Lisa Campbell, BC3 interim director of workforce development; Chris Panian, an account manager; Bryan Stevenson, Travel Itinerary Service; Jeff Smith, manager, city treasurer; James Barbara, a retiree; and Timothy McCune, a Butler County judge. The ceremony was held at 6:30 p.m. at the Hardwood Café, 646 Pittsburgh Road, Butler.

Photo Caption:

Retired Army Staff Sgt. James Manning, right, president of BC3's Student Veterans Association, speaks during the club's meeting in the Student Success Center on Nov. 3, 2016. From left, student veterans Richard Mannas, Sara Bowser, Barbara Calvert and Manning; SVA adviser and associate director of financial aid, Stella Smith; and student veterans Robert Charette and Candice Pennington.