

Veterans discuss their experiences as part of 'Ask A' series

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Mike Munzenrider / photo • Dakota Black, who served in the Marine Corps and Army Reserves, answered a question during Do Good Roseville's "Ask a Veteran" panel discussion Nov. 16 at the Roseville Library, as seen with fellow veterans Jesse Aguirre and Trista Matascastillo.

In the week following Veterans Day, Do Good Roseville and the Ramsey County Library-Roseville hosted a Nov. 16 panel discussion called "Ask a Veteran."

The panel, part of Do Good's "Ask A" series, featured people who served in the armed forces from three generations, including those who recently returned to civilian life, along with one veteran whose service dates to the limits of living memory.

The panel included Ken Bergstedt, who enlisted in the U.S. Army in 1942 and served throughout World War II, before being called back for the Korean War; Jesse Aguirre, who enlisted in the Army out of high school and fought in the Vietnam War; Trista Matascastillo, who enlisted in the Navy out of high school in 1992 and also served in the Marine Corps and Army; and Dakota Black, who joined the Marines in 1996 and then the Army Reserves after the Sept. 11 attacks.

Members of the audience submitted questions to Do Good's Nyia Harris and the discussion covered a variety of topics highlighting the differences and similarities between the panelists' experiences in the military, which were very much based on the era during which they served.

Despite the loss of friends and other hardships, Bergstedt, who taught at the former Alexander Ramsey High School in Roseville for 34 years, said his experience in the Army was invaluable. "You can learn so much more in one year [in the military] than in four years at a university," he said.

Aguirre, who has deep roots on St. Paul's East Side — Aguirre Avenue in St. Paul was named in honor of his family's military service record — said the hardest thing about his own service was coming home. He described the almost archetypal experiences of Vietnam vets, including being spit on and called a coward.

"I can still hear the glass shattering from my last tour," said Matascastillo, who was often the only woman in her unit and is currently running for the Ramsey County Board of Commissioners.

Black, who highlighted the fact that only 1 percent of Americans serve in the country's armed forces, said the nation is quick to go to war because so few people are directly affected by it. He argued for bringing back the draft, "to bring back some sort of accountability."

Taking a knee, and saying 'thank you'

Posing a question straight out of recent headlines, the panelists were asked how they felt about NFL players taking a knee during the national anthem before football games to protest police violence against African-Americans.

"I don't like that at all," Bergstedt said, finding general agreement with the three other panelists. However, Aguirre, Black and Matascastillo all said they respect or would defend the right of the protestor to take a knee.

"The good thing is we have choices," Matascastillo said.

Asked about the best way to talk to a family member or friend about their military experiences in foreign countries — especially when they are hesitant to discuss them — the panelists said to tread lightly.

"You don't want to press them to speak about their time overseas," Black said, pointing out it's often difficult to talk about that time with "civilians" — some aspects of the experience are so specific to the military that it's difficult to convey. Instead, he said, offer the veterans you know emotional support.

Following his service, Aguirre said discussing his experience wasn't much of an option.

"We didn't want to talk about Vietnam and nobody wanted to hear about it," he said, explaining that only long after the war was over, and through speaking to other Vietnam vets, that he began to feel different about his experience.

"For many years I felt like a bad person because of what we did over there," Aguirre said. "And there was no one to talk to about it."

The panelists were also asked for their thoughts on the phrase, "Thank you for your service."

Black said veterans genuinely appreciate the thanks, sometimes. It's also a running joke, he said, something the speaker seemingly says to check the box for their good deed for the day.

Matascastillo said she was part of the military communications team that helped popularized the phrase. It originated out of Minnesota, she said, and that it was pushed while the U.S. was engaged in its two most recent wars because Vietnam veterans said they were never thanked for their service.

"It came from a really good place," Matascastillo said, then agreeing it had become too easy for people to say. The phrase is especially galling because she still has friends fighting in Afghanistan, which she said is a forgotten war.

Black offered an alternative way for civilians to show their thanks.

"If you really want to thank our veterans for their service," he said, "hold politicians accountable."

The next panel discussion, "Ask a Dreamer," is Tuesday, Jan. 9 at 6:30 p.m. at the Ramsey County Library-Roseville. For more information about the series go to www.dogoodroseville.com.

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