

Derry Area hallways boast 'Heroes of Imagination'

BY MARYANN GOGNIAT EIDEMILLER
For The Bulletin

There's no predicting what the future holds for the 215 seniors who are graduating from Derry Area High School tonight.

According to guidance counselor Diane Mogle, 80 percent of them are going on to higher education, and according to art teacher Richard McWherter, Class of 1975, some of them may be returning to the school hallways as Heroes of Imagination.

"When we started this project, I would hear the students saying, 'Maybe some day I will get my picture up there,'" McWherter said.

So far, a dozen previous grads are on posters with their pictures and biographies, and McWherter has a binder notebook filled with 50 more who are destined for the distinction. What's holding up expanding the display is that McWherter needs some volunteers to step up to help keep the project going.

"I'm looking for some people to help me, somebody who has time and who thinks that this is a good project," he said. "My strength is in doing the graphic design and the posters and I feel good with the computer. But I need help with the writing and research."

McWherter started the project after the tragic shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton,

Colo., in 1999.

"Things were pretty scary then and a lot of kids were wondering what was the point in going to school, why bother?" he said.

To counteract the negativity, he started talking about local people who weren't necessarily famous, but who had made a difference in other people's lives by living in positive ways. The project became known as "Heroes of Imagination: DigitalFolios of the Men and Women of Vision from Southwestern Pennsylvania." Since McWherter didn't want it to become just a set of names on plaques, he said, he used a grant and involvement from the students to turn the idea into a series of posters.

"I wanted it to be something that they couldn't just walk past in the hall and ignore," he said.

About a dozen people have been featured in the hall displays, but in time, the project came to a halt. "It just got bigger than I could handle myself," McWherter said. And still yet, he added, nearly every week, someone passes on another nomination of a graduate.

Their accomplishments are as different as the lives they lead, or have led.

Dr. Herbert W. Boyer, voted by his Derry class as the "most athletic," is probably the most famous. His

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original ambition was to become a "successful businessman," but he developed a taste for science and went on to study biology and chemistry at St. Vincent College, Class of 1958. He later became an internationally recognized pioneer in the field of recombinant DNA technology, and once appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine. Last year, St. Vincent College founded the Herbert W. Boyer School of Natural Science, Mathematics and Computers.

There are military heroes, too. Jeremy Feldbusch left Derry to earn a bachelor of science degree in biology, and is honored for his dedicated service with the 3rd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment, where he attained the rank of sergeant in the U.S. Army. He also received a Bronze Medal and Purple Heart for a near-fatal traumatic brain injury that left him blind in both eyes. After a long recovery, Feldbusch is a national spokesman for the Wounded Warriors Project and has received national attention on television and in the print media, including in the *New York Times*.

He has lobbied in support of wounded veterans and is a popular speaker at schools, community organizations, and at veterans and special programs. Earlier this month, he was a featured speaker at Support For Returning Veterans, a conference at the Soldier and Sailors Memorial Hall in Pittsburgh.

Earl Robert Fillmore Jr. graduated from Derry in 1983 and entered the Army that August, with his first assignment as a Special Forces medic. He participated in the invasion of Panama, and in Desert Storm and Desert Shield in Iraq, earning numerous awards. As a task force Ranger in Somalia, he was responsible for point security when the force fought through the streets of Mogadishu to reach a downed helicopter.

Many members of the assault force owe their lives to Fillmore's bravery and his superior marksmanship in the firefight, where he was fatally wounded. He earned the Silver Star posthumously for that distinguished gallantry.

At least two Derry grads made their mark in law and justice. Susan P. Baxter, Class of 1974, studied law at Temple University and became a U.S. magistrate

judge. William J. Ober became an attorney in Westmoreland County, then went on to become a judge.

Dr. Robert C. Wilburn served as chief executive officer in several areas, including at Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh, where he was in charge of building the new Carnegie Science Center and the opening of the Andy Warhol Museum. He has held state cabinet positions as well as management positions in banking, the Defense Department and the White House. As CEO of Gettysburg National Battlefield Museum Foundation, he was involved in building a new visitors center.

While many know Terry J. Deglau as a third-generation photographer in his family's portrait business in Latrobe, he made an international name for himself by photographing many famous people, one time preparing a group photo of some of the world's most powerful leaders at the United Nations.

There are other posters in the school, and McWherter wants to get some of the names out of the binder and onto the walls.

"One is Thomas Fulcomer, who worked for the Western Regional Department of Corrections," he said. "Another is William Wilson, who taught at Harvard and is a famous author of many books, one of them a Bill Clinton favorite."

That book is titled *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Declining Significance of Race*.

A handful of recent grads are preparing the way for more Derry success stories. Jason McCullough, who graduated four years ago, teamed up with several classmates to fund the Young Alumni Scholarship, given to four students this year for the first time.

"I think it's great that these former students who are just starting out in their careers are giving back, like all the Heroes have given back to the community," Mogle said.

When the time comes that they and others may be recognized as Derry's Heroes of Imagination, McWherter hopes that there will have been enough interest to keep the project alive and growing. Ideally, he would like to have them all prepared on posters that can be rotated in the hall displays.

"They are people who have gone on to be the best that they can be," McWherter said.



Photo by Ernie Sistek

Art teacher Rick McWherter shows the Heroes of Imagination display at Derry Area High School. The Heroes of Imagination are famous Derry Area graduates.