

Continued from previous page

Jena's Keynote Speech
By Charles Turnage

"It's an honor to stand here today - on this Veterans Day - as a proud veteran of the United States Marine Corps, and as one of millions of Americans who have worn the uniform of our nation.

When I look around, I see something powerful: a community that remembers. I see veterans, families, students, and neighbors gathered not out of obligation, but out of gratitude. Gratitude for the men and women who have served, and for the freedoms we all share because of them.

Veterans Day is about more than history - it's about people. It's about the courage of those who raised their right hand and said, 'Send me.' It's about the families who supported them, and the communities that welcomed them home.

President Ronald Reagan once said, 'Some people live an entire lifetime and wonder if they have ever made a difference in the world. A veteran doesn't have that problem.'

That's what today is about - recognizing those who have made a difference, both in uniform and in the lives they continue to touch every day.

When I joined the Marine Corps, I was young, full of energy, maybe a little too confident, but ready to serve. I didn't know exactly what the journey would bring, but I knew I wanted to be part of something bigger than myself. The Marine Corps taught me lessons that still guide me today: discipline, teamwork, and resilience. It taught me how to lead, how to follow, and how to never quit when things get tough.

Gen. James Mattis said it best: 'You cannot allow any of your people to avoid the hard work. Your reward will come later, and it will be the satisfaction of knowing you did your duty.'

That's what service is - doing your duty, even when no one's watching. And that's a lesson that applies to every part of life, whether

you're in uniform, in school, or serving your community.

Every veteran here knows that the greatest part of service isn't the medals or the titles - it's the people. The friendships forged in moments of challenge and trust.

Lt. Gen. Lewis 'Chesty' Puller, one of the most legendary Marines, once said,

'Old breed? New breed? There's not a (*) bit of difference so long as it's the Marine breed.'

That bond - that sense of brotherhood and sisterhood - connects generations of service members. It's the same spirit that connects all of us here today as a community that stands together.

Freedom is not free. It's earned and protected by those willing to stand up when others stand back. Some of our veterans came home with scars - some visible, others carried quietly inside. And some never came home at all.

Gen. Douglas MacArthur once said, 'The soldier above all others prays for peace, for it is the soldier who must suffer and bear the deepest wounds and scars of war.'

Let us take a moment to remember those who gave everything for our country and let us honor them not just with silence, but with the way we live our lives.

Behind every veteran stands a family that served in their own way. Spouses, parents, and children who endured long separations, missed holidays, and sleepless nights. They are the quiet heroes who make service possible. Today, we honor them too - because when one person serves, the whole family serves.

When our time in uniform ends, another kind of service begins - the service of citizenship. For some, the transition back to civilian life is easy. For others, it's a challenge. But what I've learned is that the values we carry from the military, integrity, teamwork, and purpose, are exactly what our communities need.

President George H. W. Bush once said, 'A volunteer is a person who can see what others cannot see; who can feel what most do not feel.'



Veterans continue to serve, as teachers, first responders, business owners, mentors, and community leaders. Service doesn't end when the uniform comes off. It simply takes a new form.

Veterans remind us that freedom requires responsibility. It requires courage, unity, and compassion. In the military, we didn't ask where someone came from or what they believed. We asked, 'Can I count on you?' And the answer was always yes.

That's the spirit that strengthens our nation and it's something we can all carry forward in our daily lives.

To the young people here today, the students, Scouts, and future leaders - I want to speak directly to you. If you ever wonder what difference one person can make, look at the veterans around you. Each one of them once made a choice to serve, to sacrifice, to stand up for something bigger than themselves.

President John F. Kennedy said, 'Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.'

That doesn't always mean joining the military. It means giving back, helping others, and standing up for what's right. That's how we keep our communities and our country strong.

As a nation, we owe our veterans more than thanks. We owe them action, care, opportunity and respect. That means supporting veterans' health care, education, and employment. It means listening to their stories and learning from their experiences. When we invest in veterans, we invest in the strength of America itself.

As I stand here today, at 51 years old, I think back to the young Marine I once was: full of energy, ready to take on the world. Time changes us, but the pride of service never fades. I'm proud of my time in the Corps, proud of the people I served with, and proud of the country we defended.

So today, let us honor all who served, past and present. Let us remember the fallen, support the living, and carry forward the values they fought to protect.

As Elmer Davis, a World War II journalist, once said, 'This nation will remain the land of the free only so long as it is the home of the brave.'

To my fellow veterans: thank you for your courage, your sacrifice, and your continued example. To those still serving: we stand with you. And to everyone here, young and old, thank you for remembering that our freedom endures because of those who defend it.

Semper Fidelis - always faithful."

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