



Korean War veteran from Eau Claire County surprised with honorary high school diploma

By Eric Lindquist Leader-Telegram staff Apr 4, 2022 Updated Apr 5, 2022



Korean War veteran Cecil Berlin of the town of Washington holds an Osseo-Fairchild High School T-shirt at a ceremony Sunday presenting him with an honorary diploma from the school district. Looking on, from left, are school board member Gerald Bodway and superintendent Lori Whelan.

Contributed photo by Deb Rinehart

EAU CLAIRE — Cecil Berlin served his country in the Korean War, completed a career of hard work and held leadership positions in area veterans organizations, but one important item was always missing from his resumé.

The Osseo-Fairchild school district filled that gap on Sunday when Superintendent Lori Whelan presented Berlin, 88, with an honorary high school diploma at a surprise ceremony at Modicum Brewery in Altoona.

For Berlin, who lives in the town of Washington, it resolved a lingering regret that he never went back and got his degree after his three-year tour of duty in the U.S. Navy.

“It was something he mentioned over the years as wishing he could have done,” said Berlin’s daughter, Rita Pecha. “It’s a dream come true for him.”

School, however, wasn’t a priority for Berlin after graduating from eighth grade in 1949. He chose to work on his family farm in Foster, sometimes plowing fields with a team of horses, rather than go on to what was then Lincoln Hill High School in Osseo.

Besides, Berlin had his heart set on joining the Navy after being inspired by seeing his uncle Donald Nimsger in his Navy uniform.

“He came home on leave and I thought he was the greatest guy in the world,” Berlin said. “That’s why I joined the Navy.”

Berlin enlisted in 1951 at age 17, serving on the USS Stoddard, a destroyer that patrolled the Atlantic Ocean and Mediterranean Sea during the Korean War.

“I never regretted going into the service and doing what I did at 17 years old,” Berlin said. “If they asked me to go back in — and my family would let me — I’d probably go.”

Despite going around the world and back as a young man, Berlin never got around to pursuing a high school diploma upon returning to the Chippewa Valley just before his 21st birthday.

“Back in my time you didn’t have to go to high school,” he said. “I probably could have taken some programs and gotten a diploma, but I just never did that.”

Instead, Berlin sailed straight into adult life. He took machinist programs at the local vocational school and worked for many years for the Eau Claire County Highway Department and as a semi driver for PDM Bridge.

“Maybe I’d have gone further in life if I’d had a high school education. Who knows?” Berlin said. “But I think my life has gone good for a guy with an eighth-grade education. I have no complaints.”

Nonetheless, he was thrilled when Whelan presented him with the diploma at Sunday’s event.

“It was really an honor. I just couldn’t believe it could take place,” said Berlin, whose big weekend also included being recognized as honorary chairman of the 10th District American Legion Conference in Eau Claire.

Pecha pulled off the surprise graduation party by convincing Berlin he was attending a family get-together.

Pecha started the wheels in motion last fall by contacting Ron “Duff” Martin, a family friend and longtime chairman of the Eau Claire Patriotic Council. He helped arrange the bipartisan event attended by U.S. Rep. Ron Kind, D-La Crosse, state Sen. Jeff Smith, D-town of Brunswick; state Rep. Warren Petryk, R-town of Washington; Osseo-Fairchild school officials; and several members of local veterans groups.

“It all went perfectly,” Pecha said. “It was just an awesome day.”

Whelan said the proposal to present Berlin an honorary high school diploma — something specifically allowed for veterans by state statutes — was approved unanimously by the Osseo-Fairchild school board.

“He is very deserving of this diploma and this recognition, and it was an honor for our school board members and me to present Mr. Cecil Berlin to be an honorary graduate,” Whelan said.

District officials even invited Berlin to walk across the stage with the other spring graduates at the school’s May 28 commencement ceremony, and early indications are that he will take them up on the offer.

“He’s excited about it,” Pecha said.

She noted that her dad would bring a degree of knowledge to the stage that is unheard of at a typical high school graduation ceremony.

“Even though he didn’t go on to school, he’s still the smartest man our family knows,” Pecha said. “We still seek out his advice and wisdom from the life experience that got him to this point.”