



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Pamela Helming

‘This is all I ever wanted.’ Teamwork and Operation Recognition Get Local Veteran His High School Diploma

SENATOR PAM HELMING March 24, 2023



Constituent service is at the heart of my job as a State Senator.

Recently, I had the privilege to help one of my constituents, a Vietnam War veteran, obtain his high school diploma. Through the New York State Education Department’s Operation Recognition program, eligible veterans who left school without graduating have the opportunity to earn their diploma.

Mr. Rudolf "Rudy" van der Velden of Farmington was born in the Netherlands and moved with his family to the United States in 1960. Seven years later, before he was an American citizen, he was drafted into the U.S. Army. He served in Vietnam as a Specialist 4 and returned home in October 1969. On May 1, 1970, Rudy became a U.S. citizen.

Two weeks ago, his wife of over 50 years, Diana, contacted my office to ask if I could assist her with getting Rudy his diploma. Rudy said this is something he has wanted his whole life.

It would not have been possible without the quick response from Maureen Goodberlet from Victor Central School District and Town of Farmington Supervisor Peter Ingalsbe, who both expedited the documentation we needed.

What makes this story even more meaningful is that Rudy is in home hospice, where he is being cared for by Diana and their son, David and his wife, Jena.

On March 28, Rudy turns 79.

Diana graduated from Victor High School in 1965 and David is a 1996 graduate. Now, Rudy is a 2023 graduate of Victor High School.

When I spoke with Rudy on the phone to tell him his diploma was on the way, his gratitude was palpable. "Thank you," he said, "this is all I ever wanted."

Last fall, I also had the honor of recognizing Rudy as one of my Veterans Hall of Fame nominees. Exposed to Agent Orange during Vietnam, Rudy is a 100% disabled veteran. During the ceremony, it was important to him to express his thanks to the staff and doctors at Canandaigua VA Medical Center for their excellent care over the years.

Rudy went on to serve his community on the Farmington Town Board, and as president of Farmington Historical Society, board member of North Farmington Cemetery Association,

and member of Farmington Friends Church. He retired from ExxonMobil Films Division after 40 years of service, having received eight patents for his work.

Rudy and Diana are proud grandparents to Sophie, 14, Jessa, 12 and Cole, 9.

Thanks to quick teamwork and New York State's Operation Recognition, Rudy has finally received his high school diploma, in a life of great achievement.

Rudy has taught us the meaning of patriotism and service, of putting others first, of loyalty to family, God, community and country. And, that it is never too late to realize your dreams.