

Bobby Barrera of Del Rio, Texas is the DAV's 1998 Outstanding Disabled Veteran

“What am I doing here so far from home?” ran through PFC Bobby Barrera’s mind, as the young, horribly burned, Marine waited for the helicopter that would evacuate him to the Navy hospital ship *USS Repose*.

He would recall those thoughts through the years, but Bobby would never have to ask himself the question again. He was on his way home to his beloved Texas and his hometown of Del Rio, where he would carve out a life for himself and his family, exemplifying the fortitude of the human spirit to a degree few achieve.

By his example, compassion and dedication to others Roberto “Bobby” Barrera, a life member of DAV Chapter 53, Del Rio, Texas, has been named the Disabled American Veterans 1998 Outstanding Disabled Veteran of the Year. Mr. Barrera will be presented the DAV’s most prestigious individual award by DAV National Commander Harry R. McDonald, Jr. during the opening session of the DAV and Auxiliary National Convention in Las Vegas.

Growing up in Del Rio, Bobby was the fourth of Mr. Indalecio and Mrs. Elia Barrera’s five children. It was in Del Rio on the border between Texas and Mexico that Bobby watched his father progress from police officer to police chief; where he went to school, played basketball, and grew into a young man who decided to join the U.S. Marine Corps after graduating from high school in 1966. His father had different plans though.

“Dad talked me out of the joining the

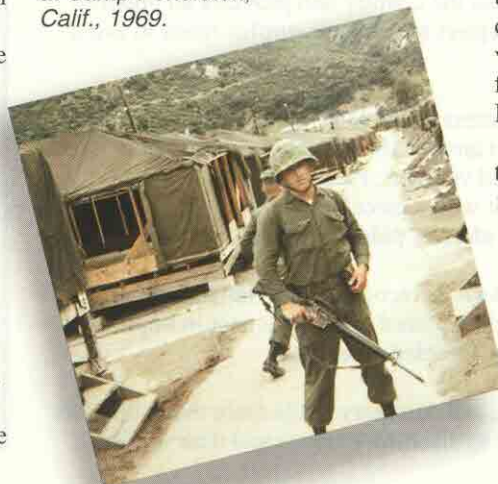


Air Force Tech. Sgt. Bladimir Hernandez and DAV 1998 Outstanding Disabled Veteran of the Year Roberto “Bobby” Barrera confer on a project at the Family Support Center (FSC) at Laughlin Air Force Base in Del Rio, where Mr. Barrera is FSC Director.

Marines after high school and convinced me to go to college,” Bobby said. “I was the first generation who would have the opportunity to get a college education.”

He decided to earn his degree and go into law enforcement, with hopes of becoming a member of the Texas Highway Patrol. But after two years of junior college in San Antonio, he decided to give the Marines a try and signed up in Feb-

Roberto Barrera as a Marine at Camp Pendleton, Calif., 1969.



ruary 1969. He completed boot camp at Marine Corps Recruit Depot, San Diego and took a brief leave to visit home before finishing infantry training (ITR) at Camp Pendleton, California. Following ITR, he was ordered to duty in Vietnam, where the life of the young Private First Class would be forever changed by the war raging there.

Bobby liked the Marine Corps and was already thinking of making it a career as he rode along in a convoy of five armored personnel carriers on September 16, 1969.

The Marines were on their way to retrieve a rice cache that had been disclosed by a Viet Cong prisoner. It was early morning the day after his unit returned from a week in the field. The personnel carriers kicked up dust rumbling toward their objective approximately 50 miles from Da Nang. Bobby was in the third vehicle as they moved off the road to cut across a rice paddy, when his world erupted in flames.

The enemy detonated a 500-pound bomb rigged as a land mine. The tremendous explosion ripped into the armored vehicle, igniting its fuel cells, sending a fireball howling through it engulfing Bobby and seven other Marines onboard.

“Everything was burning when I came to,” Bobby said. “Some Marines rolled me in the rice paddy water to put out the flames. None of us were killed in the explosion and we all walked into the helicopter 15 or so minutes later ... I don’t remember any pain until our helicopter landed on the *Repose*.”

Within days of the accident, the eight Marines were being treated in the burn

(Continued on page 28)

Disabled Veteran

(Continued from page 1)

center at Fort Sam Houston Army Hospital in San Antonio, Texas. Bobby had made it home alive, but severely burned over 40% of his body, including facial burns resulting in his upper lip being surgically removed, the loss of his right hand at the wrist and left arm at the shoulder.

Over the next year, Bobby underwent extensive treatment at the Army hospital. He experienced anger and frustration at what had happened to him, but with help, he was on his way to recovery. After leaving the hospital in 1970, he returned for 32 more surgeries.

"Throughout my life, there have been many people who have supported me," Bobby said. "When I was in the hospital Captain Starla Sweda helped with my rehabilitation. She was a powerful force in my recovery. At one point, she told me, 'Because you're different, people will stare. You can get out there and deal with it or stay home.'"

Bobby dealt with it. He learned to emotionally accept that there were things he couldn't do, and he learned to ask for help. With a career in law enforcement no longer an option he began to weigh his future.

In 1974, Bobby married his wife, Maricelia. When he returned to college in 1975, Maricelia attended classes with him assisting him in any way she could. He graduated from St. Mary's University in 1978, earning a bachelor's degree in psychology. Soon after, he returned to Del Rio and took a teaching position at Del Rio High School, while pursuing

his master's degree at Sul Ross University in the evenings. In 1980, he earned a Master of Education Degree with certification in guidance and counseling. By this time the family included two children and would grow to three, two boys, Rene and Aldo, and a girl, Karla.

Captain Sweda would have been proud of her patient. Bobby was doing more than "dealing with it," he had become an active, contributing member of his community and had started helping others "deal with it."

In 1983 Bobby left his teaching position to become a juvenile probation counselor with the 63rd Judicial District. During the next six years, he positively impacted the lives of countless youth. Then in 1989, he shifted from helping juveniles to assisting families, when he was hired as the director of the Family Support Center (FSC) at Laughlin Air Force Base in Del Rio.

As FSC Director, Bobby is responsible for providing services to more than 5,500 military members, DoD civilians, retirees and their families. Services include relocation aid for permanent change of station moves, referrals and aid for families in crisis, and family support during military separations. Under his leadership, the FSC has earned three "Excellent" ratings in the last three Quality Air Force Assessments of the FSC.

"Everything we do is geared to supporting the family as a unit," Bobby said. "My staff and I also provide family financial education and consultation, assist spouses with employment and education opportunities, support families with special needs, and many other support services to assist families. People used to

think of FSC as a place to get pots and pans, we're much more than that now."

Much more indeed. Bobby has led the FCS from a part-time, 15-hour-a-week program to a full time 40-hour-a-week program that insures contact with all inbound and outbound personnel. He established a Teen Buddy program to help ease relocating Air Force family teens into their new environment and school. He took on the issues unique to single parenting and started a Single Parents Support Group, and the FSC sponsored a Youth Summer Employment workshop that assisted 35 students and informed them of job opportunities in the area. The list of FSC accomplishments also include the establishment of a Consumer Credit Counseling Services satellite office in the FSC; a Bundles for Babies program to assist pregnant mothers with financial responsibilities associated with a newborn; a car care program through the base Auto Skills and Development Center for spouses of deployed Air Force members; and much more.

For Tech. Sgt. Bladimir Hernandez, who has worked with Bobby in the FSC for the past five years, Bobby is an inspiration.

"He usually tells people we (the FSC staff) do all the work, and he gets all the credit ... so, we have to set the record straight when we get the chance," Tech. Sgt. Hernandez said, grinning. "Bobby is a dedicated and diligent worker who inspires others ... his attitude makes you want to do your best. He's more than the FSC Director. He's my friend."

Tech. Sgt. Hernandez isn't the only one who recognizes Bobby's achievements. His honors include 1996 Air Force Association Outstanding Air Force Civilian of the Year, 1996 Laughlin AFB Civilian of the Year, 1997 Air Education & Training Command Outstanding Federal Employee with Disabilities, 1997 DoD Outstanding Federal Employee with Disabilities, and 1998 DAV Department of Texas Outstanding Disabled Veteran of the Year.

Additionally, Bobby is deeply involved in his community and church, where he is a member of various veterans organizations, the Laughlin AFB Speakers Bureau, Sacred Heart Catholic School Parent Teacher Organization, an inspirational speaker for community churches, and keynote speaker at various events. Bobby also serves as an advisor to Friends of Family Support, a non-profit organization; provides pro

The Barrera Family, front, from left, Roberto "Bobby," his wife, Maricelia, and daughter, Karla; rear, from left, sons, Aldo and Rene. Bobby Barrera is the DAV 1998 Outstanding Disabled American Veteran.



bono counseling services to community families; and serves as a member of the San Felipe Del Rio Consolidated ISD Strategic Planning Committee.

When Bobby looks back on his life, he attributes much of his success to what he refers to as the "Four S's of Life." He speaks of them often during his presentations, as well. They are "Self, Support, Sense of Humor, and Spiritual," and we can all benefit from them.

"Self," says Bobby, "is the realization that you are the most important person in your life; until you believe in yourself you can't believe in others. 'Support.' We all need support in our lives. It not only helps us; it demonstrates that others care for us. When I was in the hospital, mom and dad were at my side. Dad took off two months to be with me. My brother and sisters were there for me too. Throughout my life there have been many people who have supported me, without their support I would not be here today.

"You also need to have a 'Sense of Humor.' It allows you to deal with many things and teaches you not to take yourself too seriously. Finally, there's the S for 'Spiritual.' I died twice on the operating table. During one of those episodes I had an out of body experience. People tell me I was lucky to have good doctors who saved my life, but I believe it was more than good doctors. I believe God was guiding them and watching over me. I still do. Spiritual belief is a powerful force in one's life."

Watching Bobby talk with his toddler grandson, Rene, there is a sense of completeness in the man who once questioned being so far from home; a sense that Bobby Barrera, honored as the DAV 1998 Outstanding Disabled Veteran, is home for good.



Roberto "Bobby" Barrera, left, accepts the DAV Department of Texas 1998 Outstanding Disabled Veteran of the Year award from Department Commander Luther Victory.



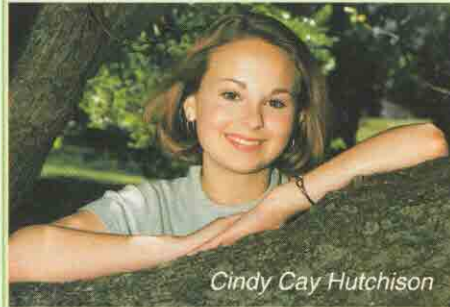
Emily Kay Peecook



Rachel Lynn Waldman



Joshua Brian Jamison



Cindy Cay Hutchison

DAV Auxiliary Department of Ohio Awards Scholarships

By JIM HALL

Scholarships honoring the late L. Kit Seal-Feighner, National Auxiliary Adjutant, 1965-1986, were presented to four students in 1998.

The \$500 scholarships were presented to Cindy Cay Hutchison, Joshua Brian Jamison, Emily Kay Peecook, and Rachel Lynn Waldman and announced at the DAV and Auxiliary awards luncheon held during the DAV Department Convention in Columbus.

Cindy Cay Hutchison, of Springfield, is the daughter of John and Patricia Hutchison, and granddaughter of John and Audrey Hutchison, members of DAV Chapter and Auxiliary Unit 9, Dayton, Ohio. Cindy attends St. Joseph's College, where she is majoring in political science and mass communications.

Joshua Brian Jamison, of West Alexandria, enters the University of Dayton as a freshman in the fall where he plans to major in mechanical engineering. Joshua is the son of Lonnie and Becky Jamison. Lonnie is a member of DAV Chapter 8.

Emily Kay Peecook, of Wadsworth, plans to major in English at Denison University, where she will be a freshman this year. Emily's parents are Jeffery and Dianne Peecook. Jeffery is a life member of DAV Chapter 72, Medina.

Rachel Lynn Waldman, of Akron, at-

tends Ohio State University, where she is a sophomore majoring in microbiology. Rachel is the daughter of Neil and Marla Waldman and granddaughter of Paul Yellon, a life member of DAV Chapter 127, Bedford. Rachel was also the recipient of \$500 Auxiliary scholarship in 1997.

Three scholarships were first awarded to students in 1996, and 11 scholarships have been awarded to date.

"We are honored to remember Kit through these scholarships," Auxiliary Assistant National Adjutant Judy Hezlep said. "A scholarship program for her Department (Ohio) was Kit's dream for many years and was initiated shortly after her death as a memorial to her many years of love and leadership in the Auxiliary. Through the generous contributions of many caring people donating to the scholarship fund, Kit's dream is now a reality."

Committee Chairman Teri Duke (Kit's daughter), on behalf of the L. Kit Seal-Feighner Scholarship Committee and the DAV Auxiliary State Department of Ohio, extend grateful appreciation to all for making the scholarships possible. Contributions to continue the scholarship fund may be made to: L. Kit Seal-Feighner Scholarship Fund, DAV Auxiliary Department of Ohio, Mary Beth Schulze, 9608 McCallum Av. N.E., Alliance, OH 44601.