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DFAS associates revive Navy's Sea Cadet program

by Ernie Shannon
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Fifteen months ago, the Columbus Sea Cadet unit was in disarray: membership was down to seven boys, the commanding officer had resigned, and monthly meetings were little more than social gatherings with nothing of consequence accomplished.

This was not what the Navy had in mind for a high school-age version of ROTC.

Today, the Columbus unit is 50-members strong, composed of boys and girls who drill two days each month and attend a two-week summer boot camp. What's more, the graduates are now leaving for college, military academies, and bright futures.

The difference? Bill and Karen John, who took over the program in October 1997 and turned it into a showcase. The Johns are associates at the Defense Finance and Accounting Service Columbus Center.

For their efforts, the Johns were honored recently by the Rotary Club of Columbus as Paul Harris Fellows, a prestigious award named for the international organization's founder and presented to non-Rotarians whose voluntary contributions lead to the betterment of life in the Columbus area.

"In October 1997, our son wanted to seriously pursue his dream of becoming a Navy pilot," said Bill John, a financial systems specialist in the Resource Management Directorate. "The Navy's Sea Cadet program was obviously the best way to expose him to that environment, so we signed him up only to learn the unit was not in the best of conditions."

However, when the regional Sea Cadet commander learned of the Johns' interest, she asked if they would take over the Columbus unit; without them, the unit probably would fold.

While the decision was easy, it helped that Bill had served in the Navy and had two tours of duty in Vietnam.

Also, they wanted their son to have a shot at his dream.

A weekend of training followed and Bill became commanding officer and Karen, a contract auditor in the Contract Entitlement Directorate, signed on as administrative officer.

The program took off immediately, and today the Johns have nine officers assisting them.

The cadet program is designed for youth ages 11-18 to help build a sense of pride, patriotism, courage, self-reliance, and prepare those interested in a military career. The local unit is sponsored by the Greater Columbus Council of the Navy League and supported by the Vietnam Veterans of Central Ohio and the Navy Reserve Center.

"One of the most rewarding aspects of this service is the way in which lives are turned around," said Bill.

"We have kids from broken homes, undisciplined, and doing poorly in school. The demands of Sea Cadets help them reconstruct their lives and set them on a course of accomplishment."

Another satisfying thing about the experience, according to Karen, is seeing the smiles on the youths' faces and seeing the pride their parents show as the youth drill, study, and perform.

The Johns said the demands on the Sea Cadets are considerable:

"We meet one weekend a month, beginning at 7 a.m. On Saturday, we exercise in the base gym for several hours and then move to the classroom for such things as CPR, firefighting, and a host of other skills.

"In the afternoon we turn to books, where the cadets learn from the basic military requirements handbooks things that military recruits are taking in boot camp. By the time they have completed their book work and taken their tests, they have already accomplished things adult military recruits are learning. It's quite a headstart for them."

On Sunday morning, the cadets return to the classroom. In the afternoon, their activity turns to marching and close-order drill.

In addition to the pride and confidence that the program builds, there's also the opportunity to march in parades.

"There is simply no way to measure the impact an experience like this has on a youth who has otherwise known little success in his or her life," Karen said, "but that impact is what makes it all worthwhile."