



PRESS-REGISTER

Local sea cadet program head retires

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Staff Reporter

Eighty-year-old Lt. Cmdr. Norman J. Dobson headed the U.S. Naval Sea Cadet program for youngsters in the Mobile area for the past 40 years, with his only form of compensation being the opportunity to "shape young lives" and instill good manners and self-discipline in youngsters.

"But time marches on," said Dobson, who recently retired from the program he headed for the U.S. Naval Sea Cadet Corps for kids ages 13 through 18 and the Navy League Cadet Corps program for youngsters ages 11 through 13.

Dobson, who began leading the local program upon its founding in 1967, has influenced the lives of thousands of young people, according to people in the community who are familiar with his work.

"He just leaves an incredible legacy and leaves some big shoes to fill," said Bill Tunnell, executive director of Battleship Memorial Park.

"Norm Dobson is the most dedicated and loyal person I have ever met," said retired Navy Capt. Hal Pierce, Mobile's Navy ship visit coordinator. "He trained over 1,000 sea cadets. I see people all over town that were trained by him."

Also retiring from the program was Lt. Ruth Little, Dobson's assistant for 22 years. "She made thousands of phone calls over the years, checking on the cadets," Dobson said. And, he said, "she never missed a function."

Little also served without pay, Dobson said.

On most Tuesday nights over the past four decades, from 6:30 to 8:30, the young cadets under Dobson's care took part in drill and classes at the U.S. Naval and Marine Corps Reserve Center on Museum Drive in west Mobile. They spent one hour of drill and the other hour studying such subjects as naval history, customs and tradition, seamanship and navigation.

Dobson said that they also were taught to show respect to adults, and quickly learned to say "Yes, Sir," and "Yes, Ma'am."

Over a span of 40 years, Dobson said in a recent interview, "I only missed two Tuesday nights." He said he missed those two meetings some years ago because he was recovering from open-heart surgery.

As for the purpose of the program, "It's to instill in the cadets a taste of military life without them having to join the armed forces' active service," Dobson said.

He said this lets them discover the value of self-discipline while seeing if they would like to enlist when they are old enough. He said they also have the opportunity to attend a 14-day "boot camp" hosted by the Navy and designed for their age group.

"In 1972, I took two sea cadets to Boston for a ceremony on the USS Constitution," said Dobson, who noted that they also got to take a cruise on the historic ship in Boston Harbor. The Constitution is a wooden-hulled, three-masted Navy frigate which was launched in 1797 and served in the War of 1812.

Dobson said the cadets also may qualify to take trips to such Navy homeports as Little Creek, Va., and Mayport, Fla.

He said several of his former cadets graduated from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, N.Y., and the

U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis, Md. Many others went on to serve in the armed forces. "A lot of them come back to visit," he said.

The U.S. Naval Sea Cadet Corps' national headquarters are in Washington, D.C., and officials there set the ranks given to the program's volunteers, such as Dobson.

In addition to his work with the sea cadets, Dobson had earlier retired from both the Navy and the Naval Reserve with a combined total of 42 years of service. He served in the Pacific during World War II.

He said he now plans to be active in other volunteer work and has been selected to be on the board of directors of the Mobile Council of the Navy League.

Both Dobson and Little were honored last month with a ceremony aboard the USS Alabama at Battleship Memorial Park.

Taking over as director of the Sea Cadets program is Lt. j.g. Travis Garrison, 51, of Daphne. He said the sessions with the kids are now taking place on the second weekend of each month from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., Saturdays and Sundays. The sessions are being held at the Coast Guard Aviation Training Center near Mobile Regional Airport. Garrison said those who would like further information should call him at 370-7310.

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