

SILVER CITY SUN-NEWS

Reception salutes newest military appointees

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Article Launched: 06/10/2007 01:00:00 AM MDT

LAS CRUCES - One of America's heroes during World War II addressed some of America's future leaders at a special reception Saturday afternoon in Las Cruces.

Dr. James B. Williams of Las Cruces, a member of the celebrated Tuskegee Airmen, addressed some of the newest appointees to the various U.S. military academies.

The reception, hosted by U.S. Rep. Steve Pearce, R-N.M., honored students from Pearce's 2nd Congressional District who'd passed the board selection process and had received their appointments.

Mike Tellez, who serves on the academy selection committee, said the young men and women who applied for appointments were very impressive.

"We tend to think that they don't exist, until you sit in front of one and see that the brilliant kids are still there," Tellez said.

"Two years in a row, I've gotten the honor to sit here and see these brilliant young people," Tellez said. "It's good to see that. You see your future sitting right in front of you and you say, You know what? I'm not worried anymore.' They didn't quit making them, we just quit looking."

Among the appointees was 2006 Mayfield High School graduate Martin Hernandez, 19, who will attend West Point Military Academy starting July 1.

Hernandez said attending the academy had been a dream of his since he was a middle school student, and with his appointment, he hoped to be as great an Army officer as Gen. George Patton or Gen. Douglas MacArthur.

Heather Carter, 19, a 2006 graduate of Alamogordo High School, will attend the Air Force Academy, where she hopes to study law or engineering.

Carter received an appointment last year, but injured herself and has been recovering.

Carter and Hernandez were among nine appointees honored at the reception at Lorenzo's Avanti restaurant.

"These young people have answered one of country's highest callings for public service," Pearce said.

Of course, with that calling comes courage.

But 60 years ago, it took a special kind of courage to answer that call, especially if you were black.

Williams served with future black generals Benjamin Davis and Daniel "Chappie" James, flying combat missions during World War II.

Williams, who has a medical degree, wanted to be a pilot, so while he was stationed at Camp Pickett, Va., he went the Pentagon and spoke with an officer who helped him along the way.

Williams hopped from one base to another learning about the B-25 bomber.

During his service, Williams was an advocate for racial equality, and recalled being told he could not go to the Officers Club.

"They segregated the Officers Club," he recalled. "They wanted all the black officers to go to the trainee club. Even if you were a doctor."

Williams and other black officers defied the order and were charged with treason, a charge that was later dropped.

Instead, the charge was replaced in his military record with a two page reprimand that remained for 50 years.

Williams spoke fondly of Davis, who is credited with leading the charge to desegregate the U.S. Army Air Corps, and ultimately the U.S. Air Force.

Williams said that while the military has been desegregated for more than 50 years, there was still a long way to go and challenged the potential new military leaders to stay focused on equality.

"It's a big improvement over the racial situation in which I was raised," he said. "We just hope things continue to improve."