

VFW

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the men. "After all," she notes, "I've always been a girl"

When she first came on board, she was greeted by signs placed by her fellow lithographers like "No females beyond this point." They were testing her, trying to push her buttons. When she walked in and one of the sailors behind the counter told her no girls were allowed back there, she gave it right back, asking, "So, why are you back there?" It was the right comeback and she soon became part of the team.

When the Puget was decommissioned, Myra was reassigned to the Shenandoah, another destroyer tender. She deployed on a Med Cruise, seeing Spain, Italy, Israel and France, and also was at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. When the Shenandoah was also decommissioned, she was assigned to the aircraft carrier John F. Kennedy out of Mayport, FL - one of the first female sailors to serve on an aircraft carrier.

When she was undergoing a difficult pregnancy, she was assigned shore duty in Pensacola for two years. Her two youngest children require special care, so sea duty was out of question.

"I loved the military," Myra recalls, "but it's hard on a family."

Ultimately, she made the difficult decision to leave the Navy - she just couldn't leave her two young children to go out to sea.

A Collier County girl, Myra was born in

Naples and raised in Immokalee. She graduated from Immokalee High School in 1991. Her dad, Pedro Gonzalez, and grandmother, Aurelia Gonzalez (who will be 99 in September), are still there.

She joined the Navy right after graduation. At just 17 years of age, she embarked on a whole new life but she points out that people "mature fast in the military."

"It didn't faze me," she said, "I earned the right to be there."

She joined the Navy because she wanted to get away and see what the world was like.

"I always like to try something different," she added, "experience life."

Myra's oldest daughter Alyssa is going off to college and is now the one anxious to get out into the world. Myra just cautions her to remember that "Home is Home." After all, Myra herself was gone for nine years, but of all the places she could have gone, she returned to this area. Home.

Myra said she would recommend the military to young people but counsel them to stay single for their first four years.

"You need to have a strong, stable relationship to survive long deployments of up to two years," she points out, "You also need faith in yourself and to learn respect for authority to be successful in the military."

She added that the military teaches you not to take your blessings for granted; to appreciate what you've got.

In Myra's case, she said she had to beat the "trifecta" going into the military: she was female, Hispanic and young - all obstacles that not everyone has.

She said the military has been a source of pride in herself, but not because of these obstacles. "It only has to do with being a proud American. You appreciate what you have more when you earned it."

Myra became acquainted with the American Legion when she and her husband, Richard, were looking for a place to renew their wedding vows. She didn't even know what the American Legion was, but when she met Legionnaires Tony Alvarez and Bill Davis she said she learned quickly.

Now her entire family are members of the American Legion Family. Last year Myra served as historian. Her husband, Richard Kohutek, is Sergeant-at-Arms of the Sons of the Legion and all four children, Alyssa, Bryce, Corbyn and Novie are Junior Legionnaires. They have all helped with the post's fish fries, blood drives and the veterans' organization's Fallen Heroes event, Memorial and Veterans Day celebrations as well as Christmas and Thanksgiving dinners. Alyssa attended Girls State and received the Legion Riders scholarship.

Myra feels it's important to "give back to the whole community," not just the veterans, and she is teaching her kids that ethic.

The Legion has some 300 members but is always looking for new ones. She said the Post members have a common respect for each other, no matter what their age, gender, background, when or where they served. The common denominator is - they

all served.

Myra said over her year as commander, she hopes to guide the post to become even more involved in the community that has been so great in helping veterans with whatever they may need, to extend its ability to reach out.

In addition to the Legion, Myra is active in the Firehouse Community Center with her kids.

She wants to see local youth get involved in the Legion's Oracle contest for kids, a scholarship speaking contest promoting patriotism, and hopes to build the already successful blood drive and Children & Youth Fund projects.

She added that there is a misconception that the American Legion is a bar for old vets to tell war stories. It is a place where veterans can experience the comradeship of the military, but it is so much more. Commander Myra Johnson invites veterans, and anyone with a close connection to a veteran, to check out this organization.

Without an American Legion Post in Immokalee, local veterans are welcome and encouraged to join Post 130, which is located on Hwy. 80W in LaBelle. Call 863-675-8300.

For LaBelle's Legionnaires, the adjustment to its first female commander is already underway. The guys are learning fast: "She's not a lady, she's a veteran."

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life would I have had the chance to experience a tour of college life, but thanks to The Immokalee Foundation, I did. What made me even more excited was the visit to one of my top choice universities. It was a really great trip for me."

In addition to touring each campus, students had the chance to meet with financial aid personnel and administrators to help them understand what to expect and how to prepare for their future. At the University of South Florida and Florida State University, students even had the opportunity to dine at the campus cafeteria.

Joel Garcia said the experiences helped him learn firsthand what it takes to be in college, "Throughout the whole college tour, I was able to experience what it was like to be in college for a day and experience the

unique atmosphere each college has to offer. It opened my eyes as to what college life has in store for me. It includes a lot of work, perseverance and walking."

For many students, the tour was an eye-opener. "I learned that colleges do not always help with finding housing, food or employment," said Jesus Velazco. "It is your choice to decide what you would like to do in college."

Arturo Olvera said, "I learned work ethic is needed to get into college. I am thankful for the experience."

The Immokalee Foundation has a range of programs that focus on building pathways to success through college and career development, mentoring and tutoring, and opportunities for broadening experiences and life skills development. To learn more about volunteering as a mentor or for additional information, call 239-430-9122 or visit www.immokaleefoundation.org.

I HOPE Distribution Center offers great deals on home supplies

By Rick Heers

Special to the Immokalee Bulletin

New deliveries of valuable goods are arriving each week at the I HOPE Distribution Center-deals that you can't afford to miss! New shipments include dozens of brand new, impact windows for as little as \$51-a savings of nearly \$200; brand new wooden exterior doors, one with side-lights, originally over \$2,200 on sale for \$700; fantastic ceramic tile, granite and marble-marked down 75 percent; boxes of new bathroom faucets-were \$79, now \$25; lots and lots of

Pergo and other flooring (limited quantities) but marked down from \$50-\$65 a box to \$12-\$15 per box depending on brand; blinds as low as \$5 each. This week's latest arrivals are gently used bedroom (queen size) furniture including mattress, box springs and bed frame.

This week, the IDC will be open Saturday from 9-noon. Credit/debit cards gladly accepted.

The IDC will be closed for staff to take a vacation from July 30-Aug. 4. Remember, we are open Tuesday-Friday from 9 a.m.-4:30 p.m.



Bulletin

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- To report the news with honesty, accuracy, purposeful neutrality, fairness, objectivity, fearlessness and compassion.
- To use our opinion pages to facilitate community debate, not to dominate it with our own opinions.
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