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Marine general pays tribute to fallen at Chaminade

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A helicopter touched down outside Chaminade High School at the start of classes yesterday morning, bearing a four-star Marine general who stopped by to pay homage to graduates who have gone on to serve in the military.

Gen. James Amos, assistant commandant to the Marine Corps, told students gathered in the auditorium that the high school in Mineola has sent dozens of students to the Army, Air Force and Marines in recent decades. The lights dimmed and the hushed students watched a screening of the new HBO film "Taking Chance," starring Kevin Bacon as a colonel who accompanies home the body of a Marine killed in Iraq.

The movie is based on the true story of a young man from Wyoming, Marine Lance Cpl. Chance Phelps, who was killed in 2004 at age 19.

The story closely parallels that of Ronald Winchester, a 1997 Chaminade graduate from Rockville Centre.

Winchester, a star football player at Chaminade and then the Naval Academy in Annapolis, Md., rose to first lieutenant in the Marines. On his second combat tour in Iraq, in Anbar province, he was killed by a roadside bomb.

A colonel had been so impressed by Winchester's leadership during his tours that he made the unusual decision to accompany the body home.

Amos said the Marines hope Winchester's family takes "solace in the fact that he was loved by his fellow

Marines. They would have given their lives for him."

Before the movie, Amos and others paid tribute to two other alumni killed in the Iraq War: James Regan of

Manhasset, from the class of 1998, and Michael LiCalzi of Garden City, from the class of 2000.

As the lights came back on, Winchester's father, Ronald, of Bayside, told students that his son, Regan and

LiCalzi were models as students, athletes and soldiers. "These three men could say they lived their lives as they

wanted to," he said, "and many others will never have that opportunity."

At a reception after the movie, Winchester added that the outpouring of support from around the country came

from people of all political views. "It wasn't pro-war or anti-war - it was from people who admired their

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commitment and sacrifice."

Winchester's mother, Marianna, of Rockville Centre, said Winchester would have turned 30 next month.

Later, Amos flew on the rented helicopter to LaGuardia Airport with several people, including Bill White, a

Chaminade alumnus who had attended the program and is president of the Intrepid Sea, Air and Space Museum in Manhattan.

Nolan Hickey, a 2008 graduate of Chaminade who is preparing to enter the Naval Academy next year, said he

was inspired by the film and Winchester's father. He said he carved Winchester's, Regan's and LiCalzi's initials

in his desk.

"Whenever I feel I can't do something," Hickey added, "I look at those initials."

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