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Flying Lessons



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By April Hale

Standard-Examiner correspondent

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KAYSVILLE -- Woven into his story of dropping "candy bombs" to the children of war-torn Germany is a message of service, hope and gratitude.

Retired Air Force Col. Gail S. Halvorsen, 91, visited Samuel Morgan Elementary School to re-enact how he became known as the "Candy Bomber" during the Berlin Airlift following World War II.

Wearing the same uniform he wore in 1948 as the pilot of a C-54 airplane, Halvorsen climbed into a helicopter to drop candy parachutes to the students Sept. 7, just as he had done for the children of Berlin more than half a century ago. But before he flew above the school, he told the students his story.

The Berlin Airlift was a humanitarian mission to deliver food, medical supplies and fuel to the people of Berlin in June 1948 after the Soviets blocked ground access to the sectors of the city under Allied control.

Halvorsen described seeing the needs of the children who gathered behind the barbed wire fence surrounding the airfield.

He was impressed with the children's dreams for freedom and their lack of selfishness.

He came up with the idea to drop candy attached to handkerchief parachutes as he flew his plane over the children near the landing area.

He told the children to watch for the plane with the wings that wiggled. Halvorsen would wobble his plane back and forth so the children would know it was him.

In the months that followed, Halvorsen and his squadron dropped more than 250,000 candy parachutes, delivering more than 20 tons of gum and chocolate to Berlin's 100,000 children.

"His story is all about hope and love," said Jory Vanderburg, historian for the 388th Fighter Wing at Hill Air Force Base.

Halvorsen, who grew up in Garland, brought that message to Samuel Morgan Elementary students as he emphasized two things: "I want you to remember: service before self ... and gratitude."

He reminded students to be grateful for the food on their tables and the beds they sleep in.

"By taking the initiative to help the helpless, I do the small things right. They mean more to others than you may realize. All anyone wants is a little hope, and that is what I intend to give them," Halvorsen said.

Patricia Weyburn, Samuel Morgan Elementary School librarian, said she has loved Halvorsen's story for many years and has shared it with students through the children's book "Mercedes and the Chocolate Pilot."

It is the story of a 7-year-old girl and her experience with the candy parachutes.

Vanderburg, who knows both Mercedes and Halvorsen personally, also travels to local schools to read the story to children.

When Vanderburg visited Samuel Morgan Elementary School and learned of Weyburn's love for the story, he promised to help arrange a visit from Halvorsen.

"This was just a dream of mine. I've been the librarian for 10 years, and I've read the book to the kids and told kids the story," Weyburn said. "The reason I do this stuff is because I love the kids here. I knew this would be a great thing. It is a dream. It's something that I couldn't resist."

Halvorsen's oldest grandson, Boyd Halvorsen, and his family recently moved into the area. His three daughters, the candy bomber's great-grandchildren, attend Samuel Morgan Elementary School and were able to see the presentation.

"His story is one of integrity, and built on values and ideals that are good for everybody. It helps ground us as far as knowing who we are and what we can do to make different lives better," said Boyd Halvorsen, 37.

"It's just a constant memory of what you can strive to be like. He's almost 92 years old, and he's still an example. He's a constant example of who you can grow to be like."

Halvorsen retired from the U.S. Air Force in 1974 after 31 years of service and now splits his time between Utah and Arizona.

He still travels the world, sharing his story with everyone willing to listen.