

Rutan, nonprofit bring cheer to vets home

By ALLISON GATLIN
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LANCASTER — A newly formed nonprofit organization brought Christmas cheer on Thursday to the veterans at the Department of Veterans Affairs Lancaster Community Based Outpatient Clinic, sharing small tokens of appreciation tucked into stockings.

The organization, Celebrity Scholarships Inc., was chartered this summer as a means of raising funds for scholarships and other educational support programs.

“Our main goal is to help students who are college-bound,” organization President Kelly Hall said. “This was just another thing we thought we could do to help the community and help veterans.”

Each small stocking contained an American flag patch and pin and a candy cane.

“Probably most special is a little note from the person who sponsored the stocking,” Hall said.

The notes thank veterans for their service and wish them happy holidays.

The organization donated 100 of the stockings to clients at the Lancaster clinic, with the remainder to be distributed at other regional veterans’ centers.

Noted aviator Dick Rutan, a Vietnam veteran, was on hand in Lancaster to help with the donations.

Rutan, 70, served nearly 20 years in the Air Force, retiring as a lieutenant colonel. He flew 325 combat missions over Vietnam, 105 of those as a member of the clas-

sified Fast Forward Air Controllers, known by their call signs as “Mistys.”

His plane was shot down and he was forced to eject from his F-100 during his last mission over North Vietnam in 1968. He evaded capture and later was rescued.

Rutan went on to earn worldwide fame for piloting the Voyager aircraft in a record-setting, around-the-world flight without refueling.

He recalled that flight Thursday, on the 22nd anniversary of the flight’s midpoint, and the work and courage of the people who made it possible.

As for his own courage and perseverance in flying the nine days, three minutes and 44 seconds it took to circumnavigate the globe, “I always attribute that to my time as a member of the service,” he said. “That was the basis of my character.”

Thursday’s event, in addition to spreading some holiday good wishes, was a chance to bring attention to the clinic and its services, said Mark Chapa, outreach coordinator.

“For us this is a great way to let veterans know we’re here for them and we’re excited to see them,” he said.

Many recent veterans — those who have served in the past decade in Afghanistan and Iraq — aren’t aware of the services available to them once they’ve enrolled, Chapa said.

Veterans may enroll at the clinic, 547 Lancaster Blvd.

“We really want to make sure they know we’re here,” he said.

The event was also a kick-off of sorts for Celebrity Scholarships Inc.

“We want to help the kids and anybody else along the way,” said Shara Chandler, secretary-treasurer of the organization.

Sponsors were enlisted to supply the 100 stockings, from donors across the country, Hall said.

“It was just amazing and heartwarming for this project to take off so fast,” she said.

Because the materials for the stockings were donated, the money raised through the sponsorships will be used to “adopt” a Lancaster kindergarten classroom and provide it with school and craft supplies, Hall said.

The organization raises funds largely through auctions of signed memorabilia on eBay. As a publicist for Dick Rutan for decades, Hall has met and worked with many celebrities who have provided autographed items for the cause.

While the buzz for scholarships is concentrated at the end of the school year in May and June, the organization wanted to extend its educational activities year-round.

To that end, it has already sponsored a Mojave classroom for the Newspapers in Education program and is preparing for its first adopt-a-classroom.

Information on the organization is available at its Web site, www.celebrity-scholarships.com.

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EVELYN KRISTO/Valley

RUTAN DROPS BY — Aviation pioneer Dick Rutan, right, talks with veterans Thursday during a holiday celebration at the Lancaster Community Based Outpatient Clinic. Rutan was on hand to give out special holiday stockings sponsored by the nonprofit organization Celebrity Scholarships Inc. With Rutan, from left, are the organization representatives, Shara Chandler and Kelly Hall.