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Alaska awards HS diploma to 87-year-old veteran

The Alaska Department of Education & Early Development has awarded a high school diploma to James Russell Williams, an 87-year-old former Army sergeant who served two years in the Aleutian Islands during World War II. The diploma was awarded December 16 in a classroom where Williams volunteers at Sunset Elementary School in Vancouver, Washington.

The Alaska Legislature created the World War II high school diploma in 2001 to honor and recognize the soldiers who answered their nation's call to serve. Many of these soldiers came home to begin careers and support their families. Some did not have an opportunity to return to high school.

Governor Frank H. Murkowski and Education Commissioner Roger Sampson signed Williams' diploma.

"We are proud to award Mr. Williams a State of Alaska high school diploma in gratitude for his military service in the Aleutians," Governor Murkowski said. "His dedication to our country and to the children in the schools where he volunteers makes him a hero in the eyes of many."

Said Education Commissioner Sampson: "Mr. Williams has demonstrated a remarkable commitment to making the world a better place and to helping children have a better future in that world. I am proud to award a diploma to him."

Harry Gamble, a retired Alaska state employee now residing in Vancouver, volunteered to award the diploma on behalf of the State of Alaska in teacher Monica Rock's second-grade classroom at Sunset Elementary, one of the schools in which Williams volunteers. At the ceremony December 16, Williams received his diploma after reading a book to a group of students.

"I didn't go into volunteering for money," said Williams. "But the feeling I get being part of these kids' lives is pretty good pay. There is such a need for volunteers in the schools. For every child I touch, there's a thousand more who need attention."

Also attending the ceremony were Williams' daughter Vickie Kraemer, his son Russ Williams, granddaughter Cassie Williams, and great-granddaughter Hanna Lee Williams.

Williams holds a GED, but never returned to school for a high school diploma. He served in the Army from April 1941 to October 1945. During his duty in the Aleutians, he served in Adak, Umnak and Kiska. He earned the Pacific Theater Ribbon with a bronze battle star.

Williams came to the attention of the Alaska Department of Education when the Vancouver Columbian newspaper published an article in November about the veteran's volunteer work in the public schools. The article mentioned Williams' World War II service in Alaska.

For the past nine years, Williams has been a volunteer in public schools in Vancouver. He currently volunteers in two schools, Orchards Elementary School and Sunset Elementary School, where he has a wide range of responsibilities helping children learn, including reading to groups and one-on-one work with students.

He volunteers five days a week, all day long, splitting his time three days at Orchards Elementary and two days at Sunset Elementary. He has followed this schedule since shortly after his wife of 51 years died 10 years ago.

Sunset Elementary Principal Michael Martin said: "We wish we had 100 volunteers just like him. He's kind, caring and beyond modest. The students really want to be the next one in line to read with Mr. Williams."



Photo by Harry Gamble

Teacher Monica Rock and James Russell Williams, 87, display his new Alaska World War II veterans high school diploma December 16 in her classroom at Sunset Elementary School in Vancouver, Washington.



Photo by Harry Gamble

The family of James Russell Williams, 87, join him in celebrating his new Alaska World War II veterans high school diploma December 16 at Sunset Elementary School in Vancouver, Washington. From left: the recipient's son, Russ Williams; James Russell Williams; granddaughter Cassie Williams holding great-granddaughter Hanna Lee Williams; and daughter Vickie Kraemer.

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