

NFL referee shares endearing stories, importance of education at annual Rotary scholarship banquet

Written by By Jonathan Gregg Sun Correspondent
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An estimated several hundred people turned out Feb. 8 for the annual Rotary club scholarship fundraiser. The keynote speaker was longtime NFL referee Ed Hochuli. Most NFL fans would recognize the name, but for the casual fan, he's the one with biceps of steel, who wears his tight-fitting number 85 jersey and likes to explain the simplest penalties in a length that would rival War and Peace.

He also happens to be one of the most distinguished referees in the NFL, having officiated two Super Bowls, and in 2008 was voted "best referee" in an ESPN poll.

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However, what isn't widely known is that Hochuli is also a great speaker. He lead off the night with a hilarious story about when he was a child and he asked his dad "Dad, was I adopted?"

And his dad replied, "yes son' you were ... but 6 months later they brought you back." The audience was roaring, and an enthralling speech followed

However, as Rotary Club Committee Chair for the speakers banquet, or as most of us know him "Sammy C" Chioda said, "remember, the speaker is not the reason we are here, scholarships are the reason we are here."

That really was the story of the night, the amazing turnout not only from Gallup, but from Albuquerque, Colorado, Arizona, and throughout the Southwest and beyond.

There were representatives from many local businesses, from the Armed Forces, the Navajo Nation, and from the Duke City Gladiators (Albuquerque's professional indoor football team). Even James Malm, CEO of UNM-G, was in attendance.

The pride in the community and what the Rotary Club was doing for it was palpable. When asked why he believed in what the Rotary Club mission, Malm said, "I am an educator...this is not just for a charity, but a charity to help our students pursue education, which makes it doubly special to me."

There was strong representation from the Albuquerque sports community as well, including head coach Dominic Bramante and General Manager Matt Caward of the Duke City Gladiators. For those that don't know, the Gladiators are Albuquerque's indoor professional football team, and they play in the Champions Indoor Football league.

When asked why he traveled to Gallup for this event, Bramante said he came to support a great cause, and to support Chioda.

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When discussing the event a couple of days later, Chioda described Bramante as “just a great human being.”

Many of the Rotary Club members in attendance have been members for 30 to 40 years.

Mark Gartner, of Gartner Insurance in Gallup, is one such member.

“We do important work, but we also have fun doing it,” Gartner said, when asked about his reasons for staying with the club.

That theme of doing important work while having fun was evident though the entire night, with both kids and adults laughing, swapping stories, and having a blast.

Brandon Everett from Boulder, Colo. was first tipped off to the occasion from an old football buddy. “I have been coming to these for the last five years, and each one is better than the last,” he said.

Of course, it didn’t hurt that there was an amazing buffet of appetizers provided by the students from the Navajo Technical University culinary arts program. From shrimp cocktail to pot stickers with three different dipping sauces to a mushroom covered crostini, the guests were treated to a feast before the main feast even started.

But as Chioda said, this event was about the scholarships, and when it came to those, the efforts of the Rotary club have been a resounding success. Through 2017, the Rotary has awarded over \$410,000 in scholarships to area students, including \$28,000 in 2017 alone.

For this event, scholarships were awarded to the senior of the year from area schools. For those that are not familiar, each area school nominates a senior of the month throughout the

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school year. After that is done, the senior of the year is chosen from the pool of monthly winners.

The process doesn't stop there though. After the senior of the year is chosen, each of those candidates has to go through yet another competitive process involving writing essays and a Q&A session with judges to come up with the winner for the scholarships.

Due to the success of the event, this year the scholarships were \$6,000 for first place, \$5,000 for second, and so on, with sixth place and after receiving \$1,000 each.

The process was very competitive, but as Hochuli said in his speech "don't be average, don't let yourself. Don't be satisfied with 'good enough', or doing just enough to get by. Make the choice."

The scholarship winners made that choice.

By Jonathan Gregg

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