

**LOCAL WEST POINT GRADUATE HONORED WITH “NOBLE KNIGHT AWARD”
Dan Priatko, Norwin High School Graduate of the Class of 1980, Demonstrates Perseverance, Spirit**

NORTH HUNTINGDON, Pa. — Mr. Dan Priatko, a Norwin and West Point graduate with an inspirational story of recovery from serious injuries sustained in a car accident, was honored with the Noble Knight Award at the Norwin Board of Education meeting on Monday, March 20, 2017.

Dan was recognized by Superintendent of Schools, the Board of Education, and greater Norwin community for his uncommon spirit, determination, and desire to “live above the common level of life,” as he likes to recite from the West Point Cadet Prayer. The Noble Knight Award was given by Superintendent Dr. William Kerr to symbolize the seven character traits of the Noble Knight: Respect, Responsibility, Courage, Honesty, Perseverance, Fairness, and Caring.



Dan Priatko (front, wearing glasses) receives the Noble Knight Award at the Norwin Board of Education Meeting on March 20, 2017

Many Norwin Knights football fans know that Dan is a fixture at nearly every home game and loyal fan to his alma mater. What they may not realize is that his life has been a story of perseverance after a car accident in 1985 that nearly ended his life.

Dan, a member of the Norwin High School Class of 1980, was senior class president and was selected Norwin's Outstanding Male Student. He also played varsity football as both running back and linebacker for the Norwin Knights football team, where he served as team captain and was selected the team's Most Valuable Player. He had a desire to serve in the military from an early age. As a boy, Dan admired his father's service in the Air Force Reserve and was always impressed when his father would come home from duty wearing his official Air Force flight suit.

This led to his interest in attending the United States Military Academy at West Point. He was honored to be admitted to this prestigious military school, which seeks to develop leaders who are not only intelligent, but who are also physically fit and of outstanding character. At West Point, Dan studied Russian-area studies and the Russian language, influenced by his family's Ukrainian Orthodox Christian faith. Dan also played football at West Point where as a letterman placekicker, Dan was the recipient of the Major William Whitehead, Jr. Award, for having the highest grade point average of a senior varsity letterman football player. The award is named after a West Point football player who was killed in Vietnam.

Dan graduated from West Point in 1984, and then went on to complete artillery school, airborne school, and Army Ranger School, which is one of the toughest training courses for which a soldier can volunteer and is recognized as an elite special operations force within the military.

He was preparing for his first deployment in Germany when he traveled to West Point in New York to bid farewell to fellow West Point students and faculty in March 1985. Unfortunately, while traveling back from West Point, he and his sister Deborah hit an ice storm in Hazelton on Interstate 81 when their car slid off the road and hit a concrete abutment. Deborah suffered only minor scrapes, but Dan suffered a head injury that put him in a coma for nearly a year. He was in the hospital for 14 consecutive months and used a feeding tube for almost a year. Doctors said he would not survive, let alone walk.

He has proved them all wrong. He took his first steps 12 months after the accident and came home from the hospital in 1986. It is likely that his exemplary physical condition from completing Army Ranger school helped to saved his life. While Dan was in a coma, Jim Young, Dan's West Point football coach, sent Dan a personalized audio tape. On the recording, his coach said: "Remember, Dan, what I would tell you and your teammates in our locker room: 'What the mind can conceive, the body can achieve.'"

Those words took root, even though Dan could not respond consciously at the time. With his unbeatable spirit, and his official Bible that he was issued during his years at West Point, Dan has persevered. One of his favorite Bible verses is “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13).

Dan has volunteered at Redstone Highlands in North Huntingdon to help others, and he draws strength and encouragement from his family, with whom he is very close. His father, William D. Priatko, was a professional football player for the Pittsburgh Steelers and the Cleveland Browns in the late 1950s/early 1960s, eventually retiring from the Cleveland Browns in 1960 after a thigh injury. Bill was also an athletic director and a football coach at local school districts and taught social studies at Norwin High School and Norwin Junior High East in the late ‘70s and early ‘80s. Bill Priatko also served as assistant athletic director at Robert Morris University from 1981 through 1993.

Dan’s mother, Helen, was the model for his faith and courage and was regarded as a saint within the family as a Christian wife and mother. Unfortunately, she died of cancer in 2014, and her legacy of faith carries on in Dan. Dan’s brother, David, also played football at Norwin and was senior class president, graduating in 1984. Wanting to follow in his brother’s footsteps, David Priatko attended West Point and graduated in 1989. David Priatko served four times in Iraq as an Infantry Officer. He retired as a Lt. Colonel and is teaching Jr. Army ROTC at a new high school in Georgia.

Dan’s sister, Debbie, graduated in 1978 and was a member of the Norwin Band Color Guard. Dan’s sister Kathy, a 1986 Norwin graduate, was a member of the Norwin WPIAL championship volleyball team and graduated from the University of Pittsburgh. She went on to become a teacher at Gateway School District.

Since his accident, Dan has been featured in many articles and he has given many inspirational speeches. Once, he was invited to speak to the Jacksonville Jaguars football team members when they visited Pittsburgh to play the Steelers in 1997. Dan has also returned to West Point, including the time he delivered the annual Thanksgiving address to 2,800 cadets in November 1995. After he finished, the cadets gave Dan a seven-minute standing ovation. [The text of Dan’s Thanksgiving address is available by clicking here.](#)

In 1999, Dan gave a pre-game locker room talk to the Norwin football team before the WPIAL quarterfinal game against Ringgold. Dan spoke such encouraging words that the players awarded Dan with the game ball. The players credited Dan’s words about perseverance as their inspiration, and in fact, during that game, the Knights’ defense – remarkably – held their opponents within the 5-yard-line for four consecutive downs during the waning moments of the game, helping the Knights to secure a 14-7 victory.

Norwin Superintendent Dr. William Kerr has always held the military in high regard, and has had several connections to West Point graduates throughout his career. One example is Dr. Evan Offstein, a former Military Intelligence Officer and a graduate of the United States Military Academy at West Point who is now a professor of management at Frostburg State University in Maryland. Dr. Offstein is the author of *Stand Your Ground: Building Honorable Leaders the West Point Way* (Preager Publishing, 2009). During the March 20th award presentation, Dr. Kerr presented Dan with an autographed copy of the book.

During the 1990s, Dr. Kerr served as Superintendent of the Apollo-Ridge School District, where he had the opportunity to write a letter of recommendation for a local student, Robert E. Jackson, to be admitted to the United States Military Academy at West Point. Mr. Jackson went on to graduate from West Point and eventually became a Captain in the U.S. Army who served two tours of duty in Iraq. Mr. Jackson, now currently employed in the private sector, also serves as a United States Military Academy Field Force District Coordinator for western Pennsylvania. In that role, he is a liaison between the Academy and prospective candidates as well as an advisor to the candidates throughout both the nomination and the admissions processes.

Dr. Kerr has formed a professional and personal friendship with the Priatkos during their attendance at Norwin Knights home football games. Therefore, reflecting upon the Priatkos and Capt. Jackson’s military service, Dr. Kerr arranged for Capt. Jackson to visit Dan and his father at Norwin recently, where the three of them shared West Point stories. Their rapport demonstrated that West Point graduates indeed form the “Long Gray Line,” regardless of age, location, or life’s circumstances.

WEST POINT CADETS’ PRAYER

“...Encourage us in our endeavor to live above the common level of life. Make us to choose the harder right instead of the easier wrong, and never to be content with a half-truth when the whole can be won....”

- *As recited by Dan Priatko
Norwin High School Class of 1980
West Point Class of 1984*