



Professor Douglas Kroll speaks during the dedication ceremony of College of the Desert's new veterans resource center on Thursday.

HELPING OUR HEROES

COD dedicates new veterans center

By Sherry Barkas
The Desert Sun

PALM DESERT — More than 200 people, including Riverside County Supervisor John Benoit, military personnel and faculty, turned out for College of the Desert's dedication ceremony for its new Bighorn Golf Club Charities Veterans Resource Center Thursday.

For years, the school's vets center has been a tiny office that barely fit five people, said Donni Prince, veterans specialist who has headed the COD resource program for vets since 1973.

But in the past five years, the college has seen its enrollment of veterans double to more than 500, said COD President Joel Kinnamon during a dedication ceremony Thursday morning for a new 1,000-

square-foot veterans center.

The facility opened its doors in late August on the lower level of the Cravens Student Services Center.

The hourlong ceremony and tour of the center was part of the school's annual Veterans Day celebration.

Each of the five branches of the armed forces was celebrated with the placing of flags of the Army, Marine Corps, Air Force, Navy and Coast Guard by students who either have or are serving.

The expanded center, with computers and cubicles, as well as community study and lounge areas, was made possible by a \$150,000 donation from the Bighorn Golf Club Charities. Academic counseling, tutoring, mental health services, assistance for vets and their families to access their VA benefits, are among the services provided for free in the center that bears the Bighorn name.

Since its opening about 30 years ago,



Steven Cuevas Jr., 6, accompanied his dad, U.S. Navy Petty Officer 3rd Class Steven Cuevas, to the dedication of the Bighorn Golf Club Charities Veterans Resource Center. PHOTOS BY SHERRY BARKAS/THE DESERT SUN

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Center

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Bighorn Golf Club Charities has donated to nearly every charitable organization in the valley, including more than \$30 million to Eisenhower Medical Center, said Steve Cinicola, Bighorn Golf Club general manager.

Another \$71,600 for the center was raised by the College of the Desert Foundation through individual donations. The foundation is continuing to raise money with an ultimate goal of \$450,000, foundation president Robert Chell said.

"We can help with anything they need; any veterans issues," said Tony Clerc, who arrived at COD 10 years ago as a student, straight out of active duty service in the U.S. Army.

Today, he teaches political science and history at the college and is one of the faculty advisers for the center.

"The hardest thing for me and for them is transitioning back into civilian life," Clerc said.

It's important to con-

nect with others who have seen and experienced what they have in their military service, and the Veterans Resource Center makes it easier to do that, knowing there is a communal place where they can gather, share stories and "talk military jargon," Prince said.

"It's a terrific way to recognize their service," said Benoit, adding he was "blown away" by all that the center offers.

COD student Steven Cuevas, a petty officer third class in the U.S. Navy who served four years on active duty and is now in his eighth year as a reservist, attended the event with his 6-year-old son Steven Jr. who was dressed in a sailor uniform matching his dad's.

"This is great for building camaraderie," Cuevas said of the new center, adding that services the center and Prince provide has helped him over many personal and scholastic hurdles.

"It feels good," to be a part of this, said Jim Hummer, assistant to the president and executive director of the COD Foundation. "We owe them."