

VETERAN SHARES LIFE LESSONS WITH STUDENTS

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WATERLOO — En route to Waterloo Middle School Wednesday, Fred Sarkis stopped at Seneca Lake State Park in Geneva — attracted by the sunshine and the multitude of American flags waving in the lake breeze as part of the Veterans Field of Honor.

“I stood there and looked out at the lake and thought how blessed we are to have clean air, water and four seasons,” Sarkis said. “I thought how lucky we are to live in this country.”

Such feelings of gratitude were exactly what Sarkis, 84, of Canandaigua and a World War II Navy veteran, was asked to share earlier this week with Waterloo Middle School students at a pre-Veterans Day assembly.

“Gratitude” is the school’s word of the month for November.

Sarkis delivered a long list of things for which he was thankful. Among them: his father’s courage at age 17 to leave his parents and Lebanese homeland to immigrate to America; his teachers; and Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who in a 1941 speech made an impression on Sarkis when he spoke of four freedoms all human beings should enjoy — freedom of speech, worship, want and fear.

But Sarkis told the students he wasn’t always such a grateful person. And he credited his father with changing his surly attitude at age 12 with a few life lessons Sarkis has been inspired to share with today’s youth.

Sarkis’ father made his son accompany him on early morning visits to the Rochester Public Market, where he would bring fruits and vegetables to sell all day long. The day ended with a

stop at a bar, where Sarkis' father would spend several hours while his son remained in the back of the truck — a place the youngster considered “a childhood prison.”

One day, Sarkis' younger brother joined the duo and outsold Sarkis 4 to 1.

Sarkis told his father that his brother had the better side of the street, but in reality Sarkis' father knew his son's bad attitude was hampering his sales. He demonstrated, enthusiastically, how to sell a basket of freshly picked strawberries.

“I learned that when you are 12 years old you can be full of self-pity or you can turn on your enthusiasm,” Sarkis said.

That lesson of enthusiasm, along with his father's insistence that his son get an education so he wouldn't have to sell vegetables from the back of a truck, resonated with the young Sarkis, who soon rose to first in his class of 70 students.

“Man, did I study,” he said. “I wanted to get off that truck.”

Sarkis said his father also stressed the importance of the Golden Rule, impressing on his son that he charge the same price for all customers and always throw in a little extra product.

Sarkis said he learned much later in life from his younger brother that his father spent those hours in the bar gambling. Although initially angry, he later became grateful that his father had protected him.

“If I had gone into the bar, I wouldn't have studied and I wouldn't have excelled,” he said.

And excel Sarkis did.

After his father died, the youngster helped raise his nine siblings, worked as a speed typist for a transportation company, bought his mother a house and went on to run a successful vending company in Rochester — Kwik Kafe. He also developed Bristol Mountain Ski Resort and the Bristol Harbour condominiums.

But Sarkis' passion today is passing along his father's lessons. He runs the “Yes, Pa” Foundation, sharing with students his autobiography. He's visited Waterloo students for 12 years and will return in the spring to teacher Joanne Reed's classes to discuss his story in depth, after they've read his book, “Yes, Pa.”

He's also made numerous visits to the Marcus Whitman school district and recently met with prisoners at the Monroe County Jail.

Even today, Sarkis recalls the song his mother taught him when he was 8, and he shared it with his young audience as something to remember whenever they feel overwhelmed, sad, disappointed or hurt.

Before a packed auditorium of students, Sarkis broke into that long-ago tune: “When you’re weary and you can’t sleep, count your blessings instead of sheep ...”