

EVENTS

STEPPING OUT



REFLECTIONS OF VIETNAM

A program on the war presented by
the men who served there.



by **MAGGIE FINCH**

Vietnam Veterans Share Personal Ex

"No event in American history is more misunderstood than the Vietnam War. It was misrepresented then, and it is misremembered now."

—Richard M. Nixon

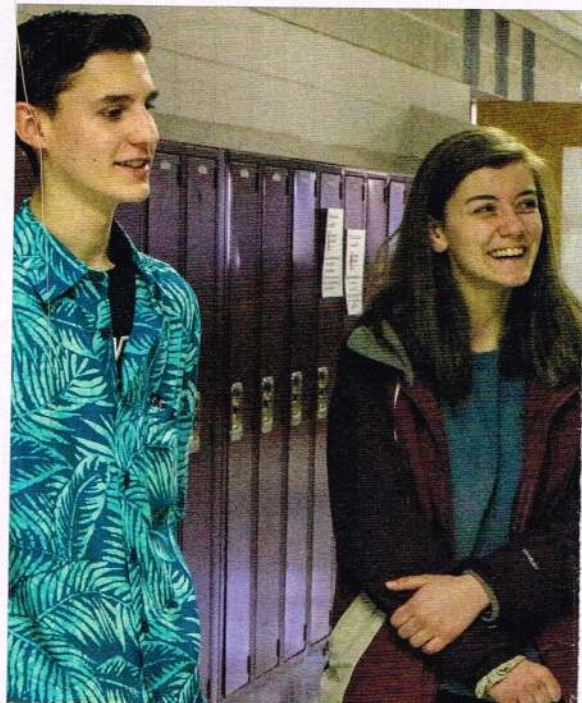
Storytelling is one of the many ways humans enjoy interacting. It helps us discover the truths of others, gain perspective, and connects us by sparking new bonds. It is often the way we come to learn about history. It is how we exchange our wildest memories. Storytelling often allows us to rediscover parts of ourselves, as we dust off the old experiences that we've hidden or have been too afraid to share. We find empathy. We find understanding. We find support. There's something extraordinary about the connections that are formed when stories are being swapped and one feels truly heard.

Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter 351 of Appleton has set out to do just this, and members are making a huge impact on the community. Additionally, their impact and ability to share their stories have aided in their own healing processes from their personal experiences of so long ago. I was beyond honored to sit down with the VVA Chapter 351's President, Larry Cavanaugh, and Vice President, John Koehler, to discuss the wonderful service they're providing for the public in the Fox Cities.

Members began sharing their war stories with students in the 1980s, mostly focusing on the veterans' individual combat experiences. Going into the 1990s, the veterans began to create some display lockers to add visuals for their stories as they visited 4-5 high schools per year. Presently, things are growing in ways that the veterans are quite proud of, including adding several colleges and high schools to their list of places they visit annually.

VVA Chapter 351 members have created many lockers for their Reflections of Vietnam event, all of which include actual equipment, clothes, photographs, and so much more. The lockers are then set up for a display, and students are encouraged to walk around and discover each of the different set-ups for about 45 minutes. After that, a moderator from the Chapter will host a round robin type of storytelling that features anywhere from 5-10 veterans. Because they have so many wonderful people who are a part of the Reflections events, the stories are ever-changing as you are unlikely to get the same combination of people twice. The current program focuses on the history, politics, and legacies that were a part of the Vietnam experience as well as personal recollections of individuals who served during this timeframe. On occasion, some crowds might be lucky enough to have a little time for a Q&A near the end. The members of the VVA Chapter 351 of Appleton have many goals with their Reflections of Vietnam program for students. In order to reverse the view of soldiers who are bitter or feel they "drew the short straw" by or because of the Vietnam War, these veterans have set out to create awareness of the complexity that surrounded the war. Their program is designed to educate students on the history and background of the war, the politics during that time, the process of being drafted, and to provide perspective on the strangeness of coming home. They also wish to connect with students on the importance of voting rights, paying attention to politics, and knowing the high costs of war.

In addition to speaking events at high schools and colleges all around Wisconsin, the VVA Chapter 351 of



L-R: Oscar Zarneke, Kalyn Vander Grinten

Appleton is currently working directly with Mark Ropella of Appleton North High School, as well as 6 hard-working students: Kalyn Vander Grinten, Oscar Zarneke, Gabe Retzlaff, Logan McGrath, Nancy Chang, and Allyssia Lowe. With Ropella as their project supervisor, these students have worked together with Larry Cavanaugh and John Koehler on creating their own locker for the Reflections of Vietnam program. With the help of the veterans, the students decided on researching Agent Orange and the effects of the war on Vietnamese civilians. They were all curious about the complex nature of the war, as well as the massive impact it had on soldiers and civilians everywhere when it finally ended. Interviewing these students on their semester-long project, the overall consensus was that they felt extremely lucky to have been able to work on the project alongside their favorite teacher, Larry, and John. All of them

Experiences with Students



ten, Nancy Chang, Larry Cavanaugh

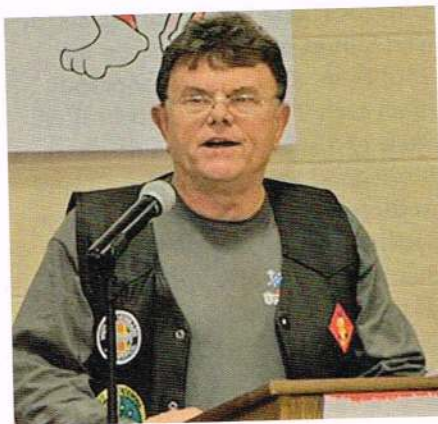
agreed that the opportunity to delve into history beyond the words in a text book was an unforgettable experience, and they were most interested in the new stories and connections that they'd discovered. Above all, the students made sure to tell me that none of this would have been possible without help of Mark Ropella.

The Reflections of Vietnam program has had an amazing impact on not only students, but also the veterans involved. Many of these men have found very strong bonds and connections through sharing their stories and getting involved in the program. They've managed to find just a little more peace through sharing personal stories and hearing the experiences of their fellow veterans. VVA Chapter 351 members are extremely proud of the program that they've created and hope to keep growing into the future.

It was amazing to be able to have coffee with Larry and John, as they swapped a couple of personal stories

and related to one another on how far they've come since their service in the Vietnam War. Believe me when I say that it would be a fantastic opportunity to watch these guys up on stage as they connect with the audience and each other. They have several dates coming up this spring, including UW-Fox Valley on April 18th and Appleton North High School on April 27th. They have a great calendar with their event postings available on their website.

For all information on the Reflections on Vietnam events, the VVA Chapter 351 of Appleton (including becoming a member), its events, and its amazing educational impact on our community, please visit their website at www.vvawi351.org. Additional information can be obtained by contacting John Koehler at (920) 858-3310.



John Koehler

Maggie Finch graduated from UW-Oshkosh with an English degree. She is an ardent fan of reading, writing, coffee, and her cat, Bean.

Art Galleries

BERGSTROM-MAHLER MUSEUM OF GLASS

165 N Park Ave
Neenah, WI 54956

RICHESON SCHOOL OF ART & GALLERY

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Kimberly, WI 54136

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111 W College Ave
Appleton, WI 54911

THE DRAW

800 S Lawe St
Appleton, WI 54915

WRISTON ART CENTER GALLERIES

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College Ave
Appleton, WI 54911

THE HANG UP GALLERY OF FINE ART

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