

Veterans' memories: Students conduct interviews for nationwide history project

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Ken Lloyd rarely talks about his one tour of duty in Vietnam.

His wife and children haven't heard stories of the year he spent as a Marine, transporting soldiers to and from the military base in Phu Bai. Even though the experience is always on his mind, it isn't something he normally wants to share.

"I think most of the Vietnam guys I know came back and had survivor's guilt," said Mr. Lloyd, of Springdale. "Most of them still don't want to talk about it."

Earlier this month, however, Mr. Lloyd sat down with several North Allegheny students and, for the first time, spoke at length and answered questions about his experiences in Vietnam.

"I thought they were going to ask me how many people I killed or did I throw anyone out of a helicopter," Mr. Lloyd said. "But they didn't. They wanted to know what kind of weapon I had and whether there was down time. They asked me how the government prepared me for war. They (the students) were very professional."

Nearly 15 North Allegheny American History students volunteered on May 11 to interview Mr. Lloyd and several other veterans so their stories could be documented and kept at the Library of Congress as part of the nationwide Veterans History Project.

In 2000, Congress approved the project that "collects, preserves, and makes accessible the personal accounts of American war veterans so that future generations may hear directly from veterans and better understand the realities of war," according to its Web site [www.loc.gov/vets](http://www.loc.gov/vets).

Jamey Piring, who teaches 11th-grade American History at North Allegheny, had already assigned veterans interviews to his students when he saw an e-mail last winter asking for a teacher to organize the interviews and tapings of the history project.

Mr. Piring said the stories the student heard were funny and tragic and helped them understand the realities of war.

"I told the kids I wasn't even living when Vietnam was going on. I have never seen war. But to hear first-hand what actually went on is invaluable," he said.

U.S. Rep. Jason Altmire, D-McCandless, sponsored the May 11 veterans' taping at North Allegheny. It's the third time he's arranged Veterans History Project interviews in his district.

"I think it's important that these folks tell their stories," Mr. Altmire said. "We are losing the World War II generation at a rate of 1,000 a day."

In the case of Vietnam veterans, Mr. Altmire said he has been amazed that spouses and children are sometimes hearing these stories for the first time.

"The veterans realize it's important and know that they are getting old," Mr. Altmire said. "And in some cases, they have said nobody has ever cared a bit about their story before."

In addition to advertising for veterans to participate in the project, Mr. Altmire's office collects the digital interviews and makes sure they get to the Library of Congress.

John Sinclair, 65, of Bradford Woods, also a Vietnam veteran, has been interviewed several times by students for a variety of reasons.

Five years ago, Mr. Sinclair realized Boy Scouts from his troop didn't know why we celebrate Memorial Day. Since then, he has made sharing his stories a priority.

"I do it every opportunity I have," he said. "I want to share this with everyone I can in a good way and a healthy way."

Mr. Sinclair enlisted in the Navy at age 18 and graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Md. in 1968 with such notable people as Oliver North, Michael Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and current National Intelligence Director Dennis Blair.

He went to Vietnam three times: twice on a destroyer for two-month stretches, and then in-country from 1971-72 as a psychological warfare advisor. He spent 22 years in the reserves and retired as a Navy captain in 1998.

Mr. Sinclair said there is a major disconnect between the generations when it comes to Vietnam and he was glad he could tell the students about his experiences.

In particular, he told them what it was like to come home.

"We were treated like second-class citizens," he said. "I remember on my second day back I was walking down the street in civilian clothes. I had on my floppy hat and cammie jacket and a car went past and they threw a bag of something at me. It hit my back and it smelled. It was probably garbage," Mr. Sinclair recalled. "It was a sad welcome home to the United States."

Mr. Sinclair said interviewing for the Veteran's History Project is important because young people need to understand the difference between going to war and being in the service.

"The service is a noble profession," he said. "When I hear someone wants to go into the military, I'm right with them. I would do anything to help them."

He said participating in the project was uplifting because "someone cared enough to listen and most important, that this message will be passed on," he said. "I would love to see it continued and maybe expanded."

Mr. Lloyd, who also told the students how Vietnam vets were treated badly when they returned to the states, said the interviews are a good way for veterans to educate and help young people.

"I think it's important because you certainly don't want history to repeat itself," Mr. Lloyd said. "These kids are our future leaders, and I tried to stress to them that people don't start wars, governments start wars."

Kevin Sciullo, a North Allegheny 11th-grader, and his partner Capri Migliozi, also in 11th grade, interviewed a World War II veteran for the project.

Kevin had already interviewed a Vietnam veteran as a class assignment, and he noted the differences between the way those soldiers were treated compared to those returning from World War II.

After the interviews were over, Mr. Perring went back to his students and asked them how they felt about what they had heard.

"Every time I ask one of them about it their faces just light up," he said. "It was so amazing that I want to do it again."