

# VETERANS Education PROJECT UPDATE

## Lessons for Veterans Day

*Multiple events feature vets of Iraq, Vietnam and WW2 sharing stories*

As veterans across the region marched in parades and attended solemn ceremonies to mark Veterans Day last month, VEP speakers observed the occasion by sharing their stories and discussing their insights into war-related issues at varied events.

Veterans of Iraq, Vietnam and WW2 spoke at events in the Pioneer Valley and beyond. Their stories gave our communities a deeper understanding of the war experience. The high demand for our Veterans Day speakers required scheduling some events after Nov. 11.

After a South Deerfield Women's Club event, one organizer wrote of Vietnam era Red Cross veteran Cherie Rankin's presentation: "It was fascinating to hear the woman's perspective [of the Vietnam War]. The audience was riveted, both amazed and appalled to hear her tales."

### **High demand meant some events were scheduled after Veterans Day**

"Hearing his story made everything we had been learning about seem a lot more real [than in the textbook]," commented one Turners Falls H.S. student after WW2 veteran Ray Elliott's visit. "And his personal experience made it very moving."

### *New venues for VEP*

In addition to TFHS and the Women's Club events, venues included a conference in Framingham for clergy ministering to veterans, and a school assembly in Worcester. The Central Mass. programs were VEP's first in that region.

## Award For VEP Vets

*Community service recognized*

The VEP has earned a prestigious 2009 Paragon Award, recognizing the "exemplary volunteerism and community service" of our veteran speakers. A coalition of businesses and non-profits, including the Daily Hampshire Gazette, the United Way and the Red Cross selects four individuals and non-profit organizations in Hampshire County for the annual award.

According to organizers, VEP received an "exceptionally large" number of award nominations, from teachers, veterans, students and military parents who had been touched and helped by VEP. "When veterans from the VEP enter the classroom and share their innermost experiences, the students are changed forever," wrote one teacher.

VEP Board member Jim Munroe, Marine veteran and speaker, accepted the award for our veterans and staff. Jim, who describes to students a tour in Vietnam that ended on the night he was badly wounded, remarked to the award ceremony audience that many youth today have "no sense of the reality of the obscenity of war." VEP, he said, offers its speakers "a precious opportunity to sow some seeds that might bear fruit years from now, when these students have become our leaders and are making decisions for us all."

Jim also shared touching affirmations he

received from students after speaking.

"One student simply said, 'I had no idea. I had no idea.' And he walked away, with tears streaming down his face. Another remarked 'If there is to be any hope for world peace, it can only come through the witness of people like you.'"

Congratulations to our veterans for this well-deserved award.



*photo courtesy of Daily Hampshire Gazette*

*SEEKING VICTORY OVER RACISM: Lee Hines flashes twin victory signs, a signal some African Americans of the WW2 era used to signify a "Double Victory" in their struggles against fascism abroad and racism at home. Ray Elliott, a veteran of the WW2 segregated U.S. Army, looks on. Lee, a Vietnam veteran, researched the "Double V" campaign for VEP's WW2 oral history project (see article on page 6). He spoke at a Springfield event featuring Ray and black WW2 veterans at a Springfield event co-sponsored by VEP, Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Assoc., Martin Luther King Jr. Family Services, the Springfield Armory Museum and others.*

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“This is the first time I’ve spoken to students, so I’m a little nervous,” Iraq veteran Victor Nunez Ortiz told the 650 students jammed into the Worcester Academy gym. “If you’ve never seen a grown man cry, you might see it today.”

And there were tears when the 28-year-old former Marine combat engineer and newly-trained VEP speaker shared his story. He vividly described the sights, smells, uncertainties and loneliness of the war zone, and of the vital importance of things we take for granted, such as mail and email contact with home. His message resonated, and drew prolonged applause.

At the clergy conference, Victor shared stories to illustrate difficulties that may emerge for war veterans when they reintegrate into civilian life, and how one person can help. “You might be that person... to help them find the right support and care,” he said.

Victor, an Outreach Coordinator for the Statewide Advocacy for Veterans Empowerment program (SAVE), also spoke of his work with that Mass. Dept. of Veterans Services agency. The former Marine spoke movingly of his own struggles with traumatic brain injury and emotional combat trauma. He sought and received support from SAVE, and now works with the program helping other Western Mass. veterans, in addition to finishing his undergraduate studies at Umass.



*photo courtesy of Worcester Academy*  
Iraq vet Victor Ortiz poses with a student organizer of his Worcester Academy Veterans Day presentation.

### *Gender, race and war*

Cherie Rankin offered a woman’s eye view of the war zone. Her presentation explored many issues related to war, including the evolving role of women in combat, the sexual harassment many women in war zones faced then and face now, and the impact of PTSD on veterans.

The longtime VEP speaker described her Red Cross job, in support of troops, offering an oftentimes heart-wrenching account of her experiences in hospitals, on forward firebases in the thick of the war, and in supposedly safe areas which were rocketed every day. Her experience then reflects the realities of many of today’s “non-combat troops” in overseas war zones, she said.

Cherie spoke vividly of the anguish of staying by the hospital bed of a fatally-wounded marine she first had met weeks earlier, offering him the comfort she could, knowing he would die. “I was talking calmly and soothing him as best I could, but on the inside I was screaming ‘I can’t do this, I want to go home.’ But I did what anyone has to do to survive in a war zone; I shut down my emotions and kept on working.”

***Cherie’s story touched on issues such as the evolving role of women in combat, the issue of sexual harassment in the military, the impact of combat trauma on the psyche, and strategies she has followed to heal war’s emotional wounds***

On coming home, her suppressed emotions emerged. “I used to be social, and now I had trouble sleeping, I got anxious in crowds, and I didn’t feel like I fit in with my old friends, who had not been to Vietnam,” she said. It took her more than a decade to figure out that the changes were related to her war experience. She found understanding in a support group for women veterans, organized at the V.A. Boston Vets Center.

“Because I was a non-combatant in Vietnam, I didn’t feel that my problems could be related to the war,” she observed. “The fact is, people in non-combat roles in a war zone are at risk of combat trauma.”

WW2 veteran Ray Elliott, an African American who served in the Army Air Corps of the 1940s, told Turners Falls H.S. students that his war was as much about struggling for civil rights and equality as it was about the battlefields of the Pacific islands where he served as an engineer building landing strips. When he signed up for the Army in 1942, Ray said, the military was segregated, but acceptance of blacks had not evolved much further in civilian society. The oppression sparked civil rights activism, he said: “We had a hand signal that we would flash, a double “V” sign that stood for victory over fascism abroad and over racism at home.”

“To have someone who lived the experiences be here and explain what it was like to not only be a soldier during a world war, but to be an African-American facing discrimination at home and abroad, brought the past to life,” observed history teacher Vicki Valley. “Students could hear the pain and longing for understanding in Mr. Elliott’s voice. They could see the expression on his face.”

Visit <http://memorialhall.mass.edu/activities/oralhistory/elliott/story2.html> for a collection of Ray’s stories, as well as photographs and information on the “Double V Campaign’s” efforts to achieve equality.

## Artists, Writers, Storytellers and War

*Art exhibit and gala event celebrate the power of the arts to challenge the myths of war, support three worthy projects, and send off an Iraq vet on a cross-country mission*

A May art exhibit that reached into the Pioneer Valley's deep and talented pool of visual artists helped to raise funds for VEP and two sister projects, the *Other Side Cycle Tour* and *100 Faces of War Experience*. As importantly, the exhibit raised community consciousness about the realities and human costs of war.

More than 100 people made donations to attend the one day event, held in the spacious studios of a summer art program in North Hatfield. The exhibit included works by internationally-recognized artists Leonard Baskin and Barry Moser, and familiar names from local art shows, such as Marjorie Cohen, Matthew Leighton, Liz Chalfin, Harriet Diamond and Janet Winston. All of the works related, in some fashion, to the themes of war and peace. Some were quite literal in their imagery, some abstract.

The event was co-sponsored by its three organizational benefactors, as well as the *R. Michelson Gallery*, and Lisa Baskin and the estate of the late Leonard Baskin. Our thanks to both Lisa and Rich Michelson for loaning us art work for the exhibit, and for Lisa's contribution of a Baskin print for auction.

### *The human face of war*

Thirty paintings from Amherst Artist Matt Mitchell's *100 Faces of War Experience* were the centerpiece of the exhibit. Co-sponsored by VEP, when completed the work-in-progress will consist of 100 portraits of Americans who have been to the theaters of war in Iraq or Afghanistan. Each portrait is accompanied by a statement or personal story written by the person pictured. *100 Faces* literally puts a human face on the costs and scarifies of war, as it shares the written stories and perspectives of those who served or worked as civilians in war zones



*Afghanistan veteran Jon Schnauber contemplates some of the portraits and stories of Iraq and Afghanistan vets painted for the 100 Faces of War project*

and connects the public to the realities of distant conflicts.

The project got major national publicity when one of its portraits was chosen as a finalist for the annual National Portrait Gallery competition. It is now on exhibit at the Washington D.C. gallery, part of the Smithsonian Museums.

For more information on Matt Mitchell and his project, visit [www.100facesofwarexperience.org](http://www.100facesofwarexperience.org).

### *A coast-to-coast journey of discovery*

In addition to supporting *100 Faces* and VEP, event donations also went to *The Other Side Cycle Tour*, a cross-county public education project of Iraq veteran Tyler Boudreau. The former Marine captain started in Washington State in June and pedaled 3,400 miles across America, speaking at organized events and engaging in spontaneous conversations with people he met along the way, about the war and its impact on both veterans and Iraqi civilians in the war zone.

The odyssey through Minneapolis, Chicago, New York to Northampton—and hundreds of small and large communities in between—finished at the end of August, when he rode into Northampton, to a hearty welcome home celebration. Tyler's main mission was public education. But the tour also was a journey of self discovery, to impose challenges and big changes that would help him to gain clarity on the flood of emotions stemming from his war experience.

"I knew it was going to have to be a serious undertaking to take on a serious issue," he reflected on his trip.

Visit [www.tylerboudreau.com/The\\_Other\\_Side.html](http://www.tylerboudreau.com/The_Other_Side.html) for information on the tour and other projects, and to learn about Tyler's book about his war experiences, *"Packing Inferno: The unmaking of a Marine."*



*Tyler Boudreau reads a passage from his memoir of his Marine tour in Iraq, "Packing Inferno."*



*Part of the event's proceeds supported veteran Tyler Boudreau's public education project, The Other Side Cycle Tour. This picture was taken in late August, as Tyler crosses a "finish line" for the tour held by two of his sons.*

## Stories to Heal the Soul

*Documenting how sharing stories can help veterans to heal war's silent wounds*

The results of VEP's work have proven that veterans' stories are powerful and effective tools for educating audiences about the human costs of war. VEP veterans' presentations benefit the community, but how does the veteran sharing a war story benefit?

We asked that question to a number of veterans and social workers who work with veterans in interviews for a 40 page article VEP produced for *Studies in Social Work*, the Smith College School of Social Work's professional journal. The journal issue—which included articles by Jonathan Shay and other leaders in the field of veterans' mental health—focused on the latest developments in treating emotional wounds of war, such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

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***“Storytelling is the most positive completion of the healing process, and sharing in my community is the humanizing of an inhumane experience.”***

*Al Miller, Vietnam veteran and VEP speaker*

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The results of our interviews were as illuminating as they were compelling. In the words of Iraq Army veteran Rick Yarosh, who was badly burned by an improvised explosive device and counseled for PTSD, sharing stories “helps heal the soul, and it helps to heal the souls of others.” Longtime VEP speaker Al Miller, a Vietnam veteran also wounded on his tour of duty, feels “storytelling is the most positive completion of the healing process, and sharing in my community is the humanizing of an inhumane experience.” And Army Reservist Jaime Perez-Mondalvo wrote us, while serving his third tour in Iraq, that the support he received when sharing stories through VEP helped him “when a tough issue arises or when memories from my war experiences follow me at night.”

These three were among the many veterans interviewed for the article, which was inspired by a workshop panel on coping with combat trauma that VEP presented in June 2008, at a groundbreaking national conference for social workers at Smith College. Titled Military Veterans Sharing First Person Stories: A Pathway to Personal Healing and Public Understanding of Veterans' Issues, the article was published in November, '09. The transcribed stories of Iraq, Afghanistan and Vietnam veterans are the heart of the article. Portraits from *100 Faces of War Experience*, with the stories of vets such as Rich Yarosh, who posed for Matt Mitchell's VEP-sponsored project, are featured. The article also references professional

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## Editorial

### Storytelling for reintegration and understanding

*Healing our collective “disorder”*

*By Susan Leary, Program Director*

Sharing stories of war creates more than the individual healing for war veterans. Hearing and understanding the experiences of those sent to fight on our nation's behalf creates the possibility of a community-wide understanding and response to war. Witnessing VEP speaker for many years has shown me that healing the effects of war, including what we call PTSD, requires communal will and engagement.

WW2 veterans returned to a nation grateful for victory, and eager to get on with peacetime living. While reintegration into civilian life was eased by society's welcome, many vets suffered the psychic trauma of war in silence, and numbed their pain with alcohol. Many still have not shared their wartime stories.

Vietnam veterans came home from a world of violence without victory. They returned to a nation where all could watch the watch the gruesome reality of the war on television, yet where no one seemed willing to take responsibility for it. Those returning from Vietnam often faced nightmares, scorn, moral chaos, drug addiction, and isolation. Some struggling in the war's aftermath found support in sharing their stories, in peer “rap groups” and with therapists, and helped to pioneer our understanding of the emotional consequences of combat trauma. PTSD was born into our clinical vocabulary and cultural understanding.

Acknowledgment that the extreme violence of war might cause a disorder of the mind opened the gateway to VA-sponsored clinics and, sometimes, financial compensation for lifetime effects. However, civilians who had not personally experienced war mainly saw the effects following wartime trauma to be largely a personal failing and struggle of veterans.

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***Yet war is not merely a private suffering, and its effects cannot be healed by veterans alone. .. The disorder created by war belongs to all of us.***

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Today, Americans tend to welcome home veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan, even when they disagree with the war. Many of us understand that combat may have psychic consequences, and veterans now are encouraged to get help to heal emotional war wounds, by talking to therapists and others who they trust.

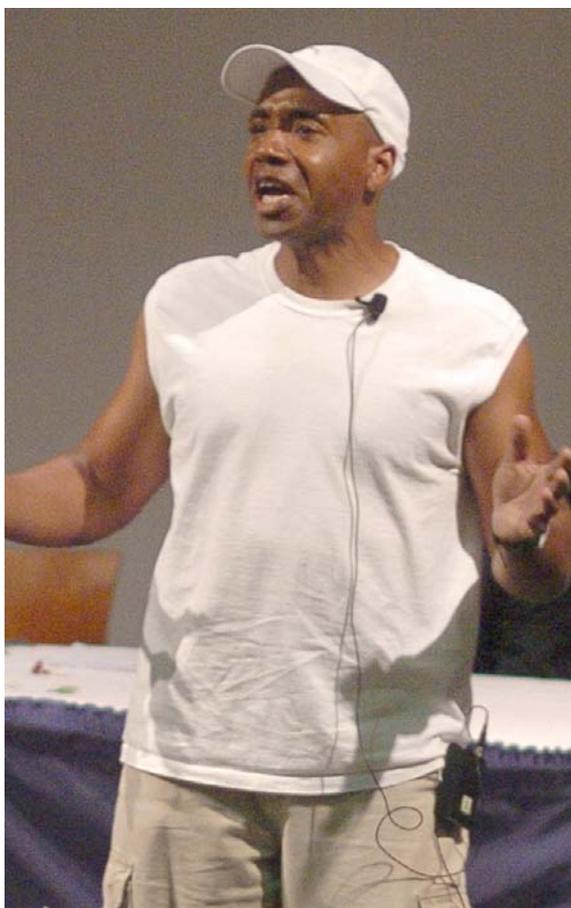
Yet war is not merely a private suffering, and its effects cannot be healed by veterans alone. As a democracy we ask those who serve in our military to experience war on our behalf, with hopes of a common benefit for our nation. War begins with a public decision, however imperfectly, continues with public funding, in the stated hopes of a public good. To comprehend war, we need to hear from veterans and from their families. *The disorder created by war belongs to all of us. Combat trauma should not be confined solely to the hearts and minds of our sisters and brothers, our sons and daughters, our mothers and fathers who are sent to fight in our name.*

VEP creates opportunities for veterans' sharing and our deep listening, as one way of welcoming veterans home and supporting their reintegration into our communities. These stories can connect the hearts of those who speak with the hearts of those who listen. With such understanding and empathy, Americans can begin to collectively understand and to accept responsibility for the consequences—at home and abroad—that follow our sending other Americans to war. Listening to the veterans' stories can help all of us to begin to own the “disorder” of combat trauma, to help veterans to heal wounds of war, and to see our way forward in difficult times.

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literature on the applications of storytelling in the mental health field and “how to” information on using stories to educate about veterans’ mental health issues.

VEP’s primary mission remains helping vets to utilize their compelling stories, so they can educate youth about the realities and human costs of war. Yet veteran after veteran has told us that telling stories—and participating in discussions after the sharing—brings validation, support and understanding from a public that once seemed distant, uncaring and even hostile. We seized the invitation to participate in the Smith College conference and write the Journal article as opportunities to further our understanding and our programming, and to contribute to the mental health profession’s evolving approaches to working with veterans.



*VEP veteran Don Chevannes shares his story at the conference. He also was interviewed for the journal article.*

VEP staff members Rob Wilson and Susan Leary co-authored the article with Matt Mitchell and Daniel Ritchie. Matt is the director of the *100 Faces of War Experience* project; Daniel, a Navy veteran, was a VEP intern last semester and is a student at the Smith College Social Work School. *Please contact VEP ([vcp@crocker.com](mailto:vcp@crocker.com)) if you want information on obtaining a copy.*

## Vets to Teens: “Wake up to reality”

*Prevention program’s message resonates with youth; new training has ripple effect.*

VEP focuses much attention on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the veterans coming home, but our veterans and staff also pay close attention to conflicts happening here, in our communities and schools.

Some call the youth violence and substance abuse occurring nationally and locally an “epidemic,” or “the war at home.” Our prevention presentations—which wake youth up to the long-term consequences of violence and drug abuse, and help them think of alternatives—have been a vital part of our programming for more than a decade.

Those programs are continuing in Pioneer Valley schools and youth programs, including a program for teenage girls in court custody run by the RFK Youth Action Corps. Our prevention work uses first-person stories. Like they do in traditional VEP presentations, speakers share war stories to de-glamorize violence. Those who have perpetrated and/or survived violence, experienced drug abuse or gone to jail speak of the consequences they have faced, as well as describing how they coped and made successful and positive life changes.

“Some of us have seen the worst of it, at war and after we came home,” reflected Vietnam combat veteran Don Chevannes, once homeless and addicted to drugs, now working in a homeless veterans’ program, speaking with VEP, and serving on VEP’s Board. “We can share our stories with kids and help them avoid the mistakes we made.”

### *Training for replicating VEP’s prevention approach*

In addition to offering programs to teens in venues around the Pioneer Valley, VEP has developed a training that shows those working with high-risk teens how to cultivate and prepare speakers for their own prevention presentations. In October, three VEP speakers—veteran Willie Ledbetter, Sylvia Cruz and Betty Guette—traveled to the University of Hartford to demonstrate storytelling at a two hour workshop, titled “The Real Deal About Violence.” VEP Board member Gretchen Werle, a teacher who helped create VEP’s prevention programs, and VEP Director Rob Wilson, shared practical information on creating a prevention program.

### ***The new VEP training teaches how to utilize storytelling to present a strong anti-violence message to high-risk teens.***

Willie and Sylvia, who are recovering addicts and who spent time in jail (Sylvia as a teen), riveted the audience with their stories, as they do when they talk to at-risk teens. Betty Guette, survivor of horrific domestic abuse, shared an empowering story about her successful struggles to break out of a long-time cycle of violence in her relationships. All three spoke about how they had made positive changes in their lives, demonstrating their “can do” messages for teens who may have no positive adult role models in their lives.

The 80 attendees gave the workshop very positive evaluations, indicating the workshop both provided practical information and personally touched many in the audience. “Please continue to give testimonies and inspire others to change,” wrote one woman, who revealed she had an abusive relationship for 28 years. “I am now divorced and I am very happy now... [Your stories] reinforce what I dealt with for so many years. God bless you all.”

## WW2 Project A Big Success

VEP is completing a project that captured “seldom heard” perspectives on WW2. The veterans’ videotaped oral histories will become a permanent educational resource for students and historians.

The *Seldom Heard Voices of WW2* project, a collaboration with the Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association and the Springfield Armory National Historic Site, videotaped interviews and classroom presentations of a variety of Western Mass. WW2 veterans and home front workers. Selections from the videos will be available to the public, for free, on the PVMA website.

The project selected black, Jewish and female participants, subgroups of Americans struggling against discrimination and for rights and equality in the 1940s. The collaboration was funded in part by MassHumanities, the Community Foundation of Western Mass., and the Harold Grinspoon Foundation.

### *Two African American women speakers broke both racial and gender barriers*

Events included a Springfield Technical Community College public panel focusing on African American speakers who had broken color and gender barriers working on the home front, or served in a segregated U.S. military. The speakers were Ruth Loving, 94, a veteran of the Mass. National Guard who also worked with the USO; Dorothy Pryor, 85, a wartime Armory worker; and U.S. Army veteran Ray Elliott, 85.

The project also offered presentations in schools, at the Springfield Armory and at the Congregation B’nai Israel, in Northampton. Some presentations featured discussions and activities on the WW2 home front, presented by PVMA historian Reba Jean Pichette. At a Franklin County Technical HS assembly for 150 students, Reba teamed with WW2 Army veteran David Cohen to provide students perspectives on the home front and the experience of Jewish soldiers in WW2.

Thanks to the foundations who generously supported our collaborative efforts to bring important lessons of WW2 to life, and to the Armory for their support and resources. See the oral histories at: <http://memorialhall.mass.edu/activities/oralhistory>.

## Art exhibit and programs in Springfield examine war’s costs

VEP collaborated with Matt Mitchell’s *100 Faces of War* experience on an art exhibit and programs that used art and veterans’ storytelling to provoke a deeper public inquiry into the human costs of war in Iraq and Afghanistan. (See article on VEP’s Spring art exhibit for more on *100 Faces*.) The Springfield Armory National



Springfield high school students at the 100 Faces exhibit

Historical Site co-sponsored the program, exhibiting over the summer 12 of Matt’s portraits and stories of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans. Related presentations by VEP vets were held at the Armory and at Christ Church Cathedral. High school classes from the Springfield and Chicopee public schools took field trips to the exhibit. Our thanks go to the Armory Museum and the MassHumanities Foundation for their support.

## Workshops and training programs earn high grades

A rapidly growing number of men and women are leaving the military for families, civilian jobs and college. VEP has been helping to ease the transition, offering workshops for therapists, medical personnel, clergy, college faculty and staff, and other subgroups of professionals who work with veterans. The workshops feature presentations by expert providers of veterans’ services, and veterans and military family members offering first-person insights into the kinds of issues and problems that may stem from military service in wartime.

Evaluations by program attendees give the various sessions high marks. At one continuing education workshop VEP offered at the Smith College School for Social Work, all attendees gave the event and the speakers the highest mark possible in six out of 13 evaluation categories. VEP provided a similar September workshop to the National Association of Social Workers, featuring sharing by veterans Job Schnauber (Afghanistan) and Cherie Rankin (Vietnam), and Lynne Cournoyer, whose daughter served two tours in Iraq. A comment from a workshop evaluation sums up much of the sentiment for that event and VEP speakers: “One of the best ever. All presenters great!” Our thanks to therapist Mark Nickerson for his involvement in planning and implementing the events.

## VEP plans more work on college campuses

VEP is receiving inquiries from area colleges for our training workshops, and for veteran speakers for student and public audiences. We have provided a speaker at Greenfield Community College and hope to offer programming at UMass and Westfield State College. We also hope to involve some members of the growing area veteran student population as VEP speakers.

### **No stimulus funds for VEP! We need *your* support for our work.**

The Veterans Education Project receives no federal or state dollars. We rely on individual donors and private foundations for program funding. Please consider making a contribution to VEP. Our staff and veteran volunteers need continued public support—from people like *you*—to continue to provide innovative programming to our schools and our communities.

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