

# VETERANS Education PROJECT UPDATE

## Big role in NEA *Big Read* for VEP veteran speakers

Vietnam veterans in VEP are sharing their stories at events all over the Pioneer Valley this school year, in two Western Mass. projects funded by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) *Big Read*. The school and public events focus on the NEA's choice for the national program this year, Tim O'Brien's novel about the Vietnam War, *The Things They Carried*.

As part of the *OneBook Holyoke* project this fall, VEP Vietnam vets spoke at public events and to high school and Holyoke Community College classes. VEP vets also are speaking throughout the Pioneer Valley in a separate *Big Read* Project led by the *Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Assoc.* (PVMA).

**At *Big Read* events this fall, VEP veterans have spoken to more than 800 public school students, as well a total adult audience of 300. Many more events are planned!**

### *Jumping from fiction to real events*

Loosely based on O'Brien's Army tour of duty in Vietnam, the book is an insightful look into the experiences and the complex, sometimes paradoxical sentiments and emotions of those who served. The vets' personal stories expand on the book's themes and lessons, which are alternately sad, funny, and disturbing, but always insightful.

The novel's narrator—an infantry "grunt" named Tim O'Brien—tells readers that he "hated" the war. "[W]ar is hell," he writes, "but that's not the half of it, because war is also mystery and terror and adventure and courage and discovery and holiness and pity and despair and longing and love." The stories and storytelling techniques developed in VEP speakers' training seem tailored to the job of discussing the book's characters and themes, and jumping from fiction to real wartime events, real emotions and real lessons learned.

*continued on page 3*

## Seeking Common Ground

*Projects promote public dialogue as an antidote for community conflict and polarization over war*

This school year, VEP is involved in exciting new projects and collaborations that encourage a deeper public focus on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that the United States has been fighting for nearly a decade, and that many simply seem to accept and ignore.

Many programs will feature as speakers veterans and military family members, the relative few individuals in our community who have been directly affected by war.

### *The challenges of polarization*

The task of establishing a common ground for a public dialogue about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is challenging. While debates about war policy are common, locally and nationally, there appears to be little discussion, listening and learning about the issues related to the conflicts amongst those with opposing opinions. A heightening public polarization within current national politics makes any such discussion more and more difficult.

***"We want to find a way to bring the war into people's consciousness, and to put a human face on veterans and their families."***

**Sara Weinberger, representing the Northampton Human Rights Commission, at a planning meeting for the "Our Community, Our Families, Our Veterans" collaboration**

VEP and a variety of groups and individuals already have been using different approaches to break through the vitriol and encourage more community understanding and dialogue about the human costs of war. There have been lectures, panels featuring veterans who served and civilians who worked in war zones, art exhibits that utilize both images and words, and films about war. Future VEP projects and community collaborations will expand on these efforts.

*continued page 3*

## Working with students as well as teachers through different VEP programs

Artist Matt Mitchell (2nd from left) and VEP Director Rob Wilson (2nd from right) pose with Iraq veterans (from left) David Vachhi (holding son Brian), Lydia Rodriguez and Scott Palmer at the Westfield State Univ. exhibit of 100 Faces of War portraits. VEP staff and veterans are working with local teachers and speaking in classrooms through the WSU Teaching American History Program (See page 5).



Vietnam veterans Joe Ames (left) and Don Chevannes share their stories to students at Holyoke High School, as part of the city-wide *Big Read* project. VEP veterans spoke to more than 600 students at HHS this year.

## Workshops for therapists, educators, and healers

*Vets share to increase understanding*

As we continue to welcome home men and women returning from military deployment in Iraq and Afghanistan, more community leaders and institutions are asking the VEP and its speakers to help them to understand the realities and challenges facing today's veterans.

Responding to requests, VEP has provided workshops to help those who have not experienced war or worked with veterans to become more effective therapists, teachers, school administrators, and healers. Over the past year, the educational programs were held around the Pioneer Valley, in Springfield, Westfield, Northampton, Brattleboro and other communities, reaching a total audience of more than 300 of these professionals.

### *Challenges of homecoming*

As a result of the stress and emotional trauma experienced in a war zone, veterans may be struggling to maintain their relationships and civilian jobs, and to care for families. Some face the prospect of repeated deployments, sometimes in spite of PTSD or physical injuries. Many return to communities where family, friends and employers want to do a better job supporting their veterans and helping them through these challenges, but don't know how.

Most VEP events feature a trained professional— such as a counselor, an education administrator, a member of the clergy— with expertise working with veterans and military families. The VEP speakers share stories that deepen the learning and discussion.

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***“Thanks again for the amazing experience at Union Institute. Your workshop definitely stands out as the most powerful presentation in my 17 years there, on the faculty. I would not change a thing in the presentation, except to have it be a day-long event... Story is the most powerful tool we have in communicating, and that was demonstrated so well... I loved how different the veterans were in the manner of presentation, and I was so struck by unique pieces of each. I also loved the diversity of the presenters, in and of themselves...”***

Faculty member at a VEP workshop for graduate counseling students at Union Inst., Brattleboro VT

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### *Veterans and family members share first-person insights*

Vietnam veterans often speak at the workshops, describing their decades long journey back into civilian life. They share insights and lessons learned along the way, and offer advice for those who work with veterans. Iraq and Afghanistan vets share as well, wanting to help other vets, yet often struggling themselves with the issues they are describing. Most are grateful for the sincere questions and open listening, and experience their sharing as healing. The faces of the audience, as well as their questions, affirms both the reality of the veterans' experience and the understanding gained by sharing it.

The vets are joined in their sharing sometimes by military family members, and the staff from institutions working with veterans and their families, such as the V.A. Veterans Center, Umass Veterans Services, and the Umass Extensive Service. Speakers may express deep frustration with how little progress we seem to have made as a society in understanding war.

### *Positive responses*

Workshop participants have responded very positively. One senior administrator at Westfield State University, who had attended a presentation featuring Afghanistan vet Jon Schnauber sharing his story of difficult transition from military to college, remarked that the VEP workshop was “one of the most engaging and effective informational sessions” he had ever attended.



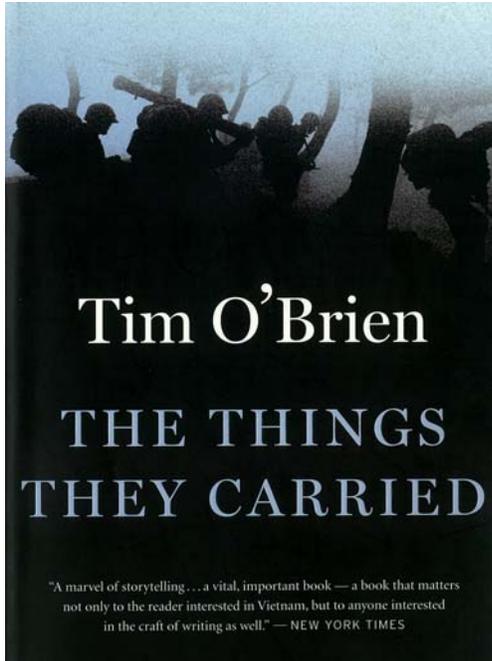
*Cherie Rankin, a civilian Red Cross worker who served in Vietnam, shares her story at the Union Inst. (The person in background is signing the story for hearing impaired.)*

Many workshop attendees say the VEP events give them their first experience of hearing veterans' stories in depth. At a masters degree workshop at Union Institute in Brattleboro, co-led by psychologist and guest speaker Dr. Sam Osherson of the Fielding Institute, a woman whose son had served in Iraq and whose ex-husband had been deeply traumatized by his Vietnam combat experience tearfully thanked VEP speakers for providing her deep insight into the problems her veterans had faced.

“You've given me the understanding that they couldn't,” she said. “All of us needed to hear and to understand what was shared here today.”

*The Big Read...from page 1*

Speaking at Big Read events, VEP vets describe things they literally carried in war—radios, terrible “C-Rats” food rations, photos of girlfriends back home—using them as starting points for discussion about war. They also speak from the heart of the vivid memories they carried home, some pleasant (camaraderie with comrades, lively soul music blaring on off duty hours) and most not (tending to wounded, the smell of fear and death on the battlefield, carrying body bags, the existential loneliness and rejection felt on arriving back, feeling betrayed by their government).



*Things they carried and they still carry*

Cherie Rankin, a Red Cross worker, recalls the board games she played and stories she told on her job, to entertain and to try to bring normalcy and smiles to troops at recreation centers in Da Nang and forward fire bases in the countryside. She also speaks of the helplessness and pain she felt as she stood by a dying soldier in a hospital, and of subsequently shutting down her emotions so she could make it through her Vietnam tour.

Army vet Al Miller speaks of carrying extra rounds of ammunition and looking after his squad, and of the mental images he carries still, of witnessing a close comrade killed by a booby trap, and of the North Vietnamese soldier he shot speaking to him in Vietnamese before he died.

After Al's October presentation in a South Hadley H.S. English class, students wrote “amazing, engaging and touching...very emotional”, “a wonderful mixture of drama, fear, and humility”, and “you really helped me get it. Thanks!”

Through the *Big Read*, this winter and spring, VEP's Vietnam vets—along with veterans of WW2, Desert Storm, Afghanistan and Iraq— will continue to share about the things they carried in war time, and the things they still carry, etched in their hearts. *Please contact VEP if you would like to arrange a Big Read presentation in your school or community.*

*Seeking Common Ground... from Page 1*

*Deepening efforts to create dialogue*

VEP will continue to organize events that feature veteran and military family speakers. We will collaborate with many new partners—in the community, from the VA, in city and state government positions, at area colleges, and in area peace groups. All parties involved in project collaborations and planning new events are dedicated to introducing the public to our veterans and military families, and in promoting understanding, respect and dialogue over debate.

One on-going project developed this summer, in response to a sometimes bitter debate over a non-binding resolution before the Northampton City Council to stop funding war in Iraq and Afghanistan. (The measure eventually passed.) Some members of city government and constituencies on either side of the “War Dollars” resolution began meeting with VEP staff to discuss programs and community initiatives that would help the community to get beyond the debate.

The *Our Community, Our Families, Our Veterans* collaboration is still formulating goals and planning first events. Members have their own deeply held convictions, but they are not trying to impose them on others. They share the conviction that unyielding debate over the war only will further divide the public, and that learning about the war and a higher level of consciousness of the veterans and military families in our midst could provide enough common ground for a civil dialogue that would be helpful and healing to the community.

“By communicating honestly and outside the traditional political arena, we can try to overcome perceived differences in order to find our greatly shared common ground,” remarked Western Massachusetts American Friends Service Committee Program Coordinator Jeff Napolitano at a recent meeting.

*Campus as well as community programs*

VEP hopes to expand already planned projects, which utilize the humanities and the arts, as well as panels of VEP veterans, military family members and guest speakers from agencies such as the VA. Events would be held on area college campuses, as well as in public venues, and potentially at the V.A. in Northampton. Many will invite Iraq and Afghanistan veterans, as well as military family members, to join in the dialogue. Initiatives include:

- Planning a variety of public, college and high school events and projects that draw on classic war literature, writing, philosophy and other humanities disciplines to encourage dialogue, understanding and respect for veterans, military families, and civilians living in war zones. Some of these events will be linked to the “Big Read” events described on page one.
- Collaborating with college departments and organizations that help the general student body, faculty and staff to learn more about the realities of war and the challenges veterans may have as they transition from war zone to classroom. These events will support our outreach to college veterans and provide venues where they to share their experiences with other students and their community. These efforts will include the Veteran Writers Project, described on the back page.

## Stories show teens realities of violence and drugs, encourage alternatives

VEP's violence prevention and substance abuse prevention programs continued reaching out to a variety of at-risk teens this past year, with presentations in public, alternative, and juvenile justice school programs.

Program speakers included mostly veterans and some non-veterans. All had experienced violence, most as perpetrators and many as wounded victims. Some had been bystanders to acts of violence. Many had been emotionally traumatized by their experiences and treated for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Some at one time had abused drugs and even served time incarcerated for drug-related offenses.

All these VEP volunteers have gone through remarkable positive life changes, and have trained to share their stories in ways that can inspire young people to overcome challenges and make positive changes in their own lives. A war story provides some powerful lessons that get through to even hard-to-reach teens. While sometimes difficult to hear, it can engage students in profound ways.

"I actually think that it was good they talked about the harsh violence," said one student about a presentation by two Vietnam veterans. "They told the truth. They didn't try to make it seem better than it was."

The skillfully shared experiences also encourage students to reflect, not just about the varied consequences of violence and drugs, but also about the ways the speakers have confronted problems and overcome adversity. Teachers express gratitude for these community adults who reach out to teens and show that they care.

### *Unforgettable examples*

Illustrating the consequences violent acts can have, on the person who is targeted and the initiator, Vietnam veteran Al Miller describes searching a remote hut on a combat mission and making a split-second decision to shoot a North Vietnamese soldier at short range, fearing the young man was reaching for a weapon. He later found no weapon. Al says the incident still weighs heavy on his heart.

"So what happens in this micro-moment of history between me and this other individual?," Al asked one class. "Well I'm thinking, 'Oh my God, I wish this was a dream.' I wish that I could change this. I wish that I could take those rounds back out of his chest. But I can't. And it's not a dream. And I'm going to live with this for the rest of my life."

Sylvia, a non-veteran speaker, shares an incident from her young teenage years with serious consequences that radically changed her life. Abused as a child, she had run away from foster care. An addict, she lived on the streets and dealt drugs. Angry at deal gone bad, she set a fire in an abandoned building inhabited by the individuals she thought cheated her. She thought no one was there, but the tragic and unintended consequence of her act, she tells audiences, was the death of a man unrelated to the drug deal.

Sylvia tells incarcerated teenage girls in the South Hadley Girls Program of the RFK Children's Action Corps, about her regret for those acts, and her transformation during incarceration in the juvenile justice system from an angry, hurt girl to a responsible young adult who took full responsibility for her crime. Now married and a mother, she has graduated from community college and is continuing her education while working in the human services field, and speaking to audiences of high-risk teens with VEP and helping teens to make healthier choices.

"It was a really good presentation because it showed/told us that if you don't take control of your own life then others and other things will," one girl wrote after Sylvia's visit. "It had to do with war not just with other countries, but with yourself."

## Remembering George Williams



Long-time VEP member George Williams, one of the co-founders of VEP's prevention programs and a tireless volunteer speaker, passed away in September, at age 62. Raised in the Bedford Stuyvesant section in Brooklyn, George was drafted into the Army in 1966 and served a year in South Vietnam with a First Infantry Division Ranger unit.

After Army service, he returned to NYC. Eventually George became a firefighter and served with Squad One, an elite unit based in Brooklyn. He retired from the NYFD in the early 1990s, moved to Northampton, and became very active in community service.

Volunteering with the Veterans Education Project, he spoke in schools, sharing stories of the streets of "Bed Sty", his combat experiences, and his difficult transition to a positive and productive civilian life after Vietnam. He shared personal struggles and victories growing up African American, offering students insights into civil rights history. George was President of Wally Nelson Chapter of Veterans for Peace, an NAACP member, and a mentor to many vets of Iraq and Afghanistan.

George also was very active in Northampton's art scene, pursuing visual art, poetry, and occasional community theatre. He often carried his blues harps, offering spontaneous musical interludes at various events.

A letter George wrote from Vietnam, which described the country and its people, and lamented the destitute orphans the war had created, was printed with other letters home in the book *Dear America; Letters Home*, and inscribed in the Manhattan Vietnam Veterans Memorial. He read it to show students depth of feeling he felt for Vietnamese orphaned children. One of his biggest unfulfilled dreams was to go back, in peace, to visit Vietnam.

George's gentle nature and his contributions to the VEP's programs and the community will always be remembered.

## Military families group reaches out

On the very day that Combat Operations in Iraq were declared to be finished, VEP received an email from a very shook up mom who reported that her son had just left to join combat forces there, on his third deployment. She also wrote that a niece serving in Iraq recently had been injured. This mom found others from Western Mass. who understand when she joined VEP's *Military Families Connect* group. While some family members have been blessed to have their loved ones return and be discharged from military service, others local families are facing new and repeated deployments. Their jobs range from clearing roadside bombs, to flying helicopters, to attempting to improve civilian relations.

**“[VEP] has been so integral in the lives of so many. They have become the lifelines to many of us.”**

Kevin Lucey, MFC group co-founding member, whose son was overcome by PTSD and took his life nine months after returning from duty with the Marine Reserves in Iraq.

The need for support for military families is growing. There is a low level of public awareness and involvement with families who have loved ones serving in war zones. At the same time, local military families are coping with more, not less, impact from these wars. Every deployment brings a greater likelihood of physical, mental, psychological and spiritual injury. Never has our government asked the same people to return to war over and over again. Often even those diagnosed with injury from previous deployments are sent back for another tour.

The group meetings may have tears and sorrow, yet members find strong connections and enjoy giving as well as receiving support. Long-time group members reach out to others needing support, such as the children of military parents, and those grieving the war-related loss of someone they love. Several members of the group have trained to be support group leaders and, with VEP support, hope to launch a bereavement group for families that have suffered such a loss. Sadly, as wars in Iraq and Afghanistan continue, the number of area people who have lost a loved one because of the war continues to grow.

Members also plan social times, such as baking holiday cookies, and have even created fun new fundraising efforts for VEP, including selling turkey BBQ legs at the Garlic Festival in Orange this fall (see photo and article on back page).

For more information on Military Families Connect email us, [vep@crocker.com](mailto:vep@crocker.com), or call 413-253-4947.

## Teaching teachers

*VEP partner in local D.O.E.-funded program for teachers*

Thanks in part to VEP involvement in a D.O.E.-funded *Teaching American History Program*, local educators are learning ways to teach history that utilize veteran speakers, art that explores the realities and themes of war, field trips to local monuments, and other community resources. The main sponsors of the *Memorializing Promise and Conflict* program, Gateway School District and Westfield State University, asked VEP to be a project partner.

Aligned with Mass. curriculum state standards, the program is serving about 25 teachers from Hampshire, Hampden and Berkshire Counties.

Partway into the first year of the three-year project, teachers already have taken guided tours of Washington, D.C., monuments and museums co-led by VEP staff, and participated in book groups that included presentations by VEP veterans that merged veterans' storytelling into the teaching of war literature and history.



*Two Western Mass. teachers in the TAH program prepare to take a rubbing of the name of a veteran from their community that is etched on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C. VEP's Rob Wilson coordinated the guided memorial visit with staff at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund*

In early November, Artist Matt Mitchell and Afghanistan veteran Daniel Burland ran a day-long seminar on utilizing art to teach about history and conflict. Culmination of the event was an exhibit of the VEP sponsored "100 Faces of War Experience" project, portraits of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans displayed with their stories. The exhibit, which has traveled to various galleries in communities and colleges across the country, was at the Westfield Athenaeum for the entire month.

VEP is scheduling veterans to visit various public school classes over the entire school year, helping teachers in the program to utilize the strategies and methods shared in TAH workshops. In April, VEP staff will run an all day workshop for teachers on using veterans' stories in the classroom to help to teach history.

**VEP has upgraded its website. Visit**

**[www.vetsed.org](http://www.vetsed.org)**

**for more information on our programs.**

## Veteran Writers Project

*One cannot tell the story of a nation without telling the story of its wars, and these often harrowing tales are most vividly told by the men and women who lived them.*

-Dana Gioia, Chairman, National Endowment for the Arts, in the preface to the book *Operation Homecoming*

VEP plans to launch the **Pioneer Valley Veteran Writers Project** this winter, offering veterans and military family members free workshops on writing about their wartime and homecoming experiences.

Established writers and editors, including Andrew Carroll (*Operation Homecoming, War Letters*), will join local writers and college writing instructors to lead the workshops. The project will feature events where veterans will read from their work, art and photography exhibits that display veterans' writing, and opportunities to publish writing at the VEP website.

The project is reaching out to Iraq and Afghanistan vets on local campuses, but it also will recruit veterans of other eras, as well as military family members. Staff and professors at Umass Amherst and Westfield State University have expressed interest in hosting and helping with workshops.

The Pioneer Valley project is inspired by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) **Operation Homecoming** writing project (Andrew Carroll's book of the same name is a compilation of project's writings). It will provide veterans a creative outlet for sharing their stories, and help connect that large majority of local residents who do not have a family member in the military to the realities that our war veterans and their families face today.

The VEP project will offer a series of three workshops, one on creating an oral history similar to those shared by VEP in classrooms, and two writing workshops.

Email VEP ([vep@crocker.com](mailto:vep@crocker.com)) for more information on the project.

## Two days of Peace, of Love and... of Garlic!

*Creative fundraising from our local military families for VEP!*

Like many non profits today, VEP faces an increasing need for our work at a time when financial support is harder to come by. We receive no government support, and offer our presentations, speaker training and support groups regardless of ability to pay. Members of our *Military Families Connect* group showed us a fun new way to raise funds this year, when group member Annie Diemand of Diemand's Egg Farm offered to help us organize a food booth at the **Garlic Festival** in Orange.

VEP Board member and family group supporter Barbara Tiner worked with Annie to coordinate our effort at the popular festival, which billed itself as "Two days of Peace, Love and Garlic." The two MFC members brined and prepared hundreds of BBQ Turkey legs for us to sell, prepared with a generous dose of garlic of course! Other MFC members volunteered to fill in all the needed time slots for festival booth, and some prepared additional items to add to our offerings. We put up the signs and flyers and waited for the turkey-leg-and-garlic loving customers to show up.

Show up they did. When word got out about how incredibly good our BBQ Turkey legs were, we could not keep up with demand. We had a blast, sold out early both days, and made more than \$1,000 for VEP. Thank you so much to Annie and Barbara and everyone in the family group, for bring the fun into fundraising for VEP this fall! Look for the *VEP-MFC booth at the Garlic Festival next October, and come early in case we sell out again.*



*In addition to serious heart-to-heart sharing and support that the Military Families Connect group offers one another (see article, page 5), they try to have fun. Here they are last December, at Diemand Farm, to bake holiday cookies. This December, new members will join long-time members for MFC's second annual holiday baking party a bakefest.*

### Please donate to help VEP continue its work!

Your contribution will help to train more Iraq and Afghanistan veterans to share their stories, keep all our veterans speaking and in schools and public venues, support our work with military families, and more.

Enclosed is my contribution of: \$30\_\_\_ \$50\_\_\_ \$100\_\_\_ \$200\_\_\_ Other\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

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Please mail this coupon with your tax-deductible check to: VEP, P.O. Box 416, Amherst MA 01004

