

VETERANS Education PROJECT UPDATE

Reaching out to faith communities

VEP speakers are presenting in a variety of area places of worship. Until recently, our speakers only occasionally shared insights with this large constituency.

Ray Elliott spoke at the Haydenville United Church of Christ in May, vividly portraying vicious racism experienced in the WWII segregated Army, and his journey to activism and the Bha'i faith.

VEP also organized a June panel on faith and war, at Congregation B'nai Israel, after showing the Iraq War documentary "The Ground Truth." Three parents of Iraq veterans and a Vietnam veteran shared how faith had helped them and, in one case, failed to help. The event—organized at the initiation of Janet and Leslie Fraidstern and their Tikun Olam Committee—extended beyond discussing religion to ways to support vets, anti-war activism and more.

War and the spiritual journey

We are planning for a Sept. 15 event at Wesley United Methodist Church, in Hadley. Titled "The Spiritual Journey Home from War," the program is open to people of all faiths and will feature veteran speakers sharing their own journeys and dialogue about ways to support veterans and their families.

"Many people in our community who are burdened by war's turmoil, including veterans and their families, are guided by faith and spirituality, yet there are few forums that address this aspect of healing," said VEP Board member Barbara Tiner, an event organizer.

Louise Minks of Wesley Methodist Church added, "Only faith communities can hold certain levels of pain and struggle. The better we understand our veterans, hear their stories and educate ourselves on the issues, the better we can support them and their families."

The Spiritual Journey Home from War, September 15, 1-5PM at the Wesley United Methodist Church, 98 N. Maple Street, Hadley, MA 01035. Registration is encouraged Call 413-253-4947 or 413-549-1550 and leave your name and phone number, if no one is available. Or send an email to office@wesleyfamily.org.



Ray Elliott tells stories of serving in a segregated Army in WWII, sharing both history and life lessons with a group of incarcerated youth.

Photo courtesy of Springfield Republican

25 years old and still growing!

The world has changed markedly since 1982, when the Veterans Education Project was started by several area Vietnam veterans and activists. The group's original purpose: to provide teens considering a military career a chance to hear from a veteran, not just a recruiter, and to teach future leaders and voters eye-opening lessons about war.

The group's face and profile are very different from a quarter century ago, when all our speakers were white male veterans. VEP's trained speakers now represent the diversity of our community, from a variety of backgrounds and age groups (25 to 88, who served from WWII to Iraq). About 35 percent are men and women of color.

"For young people who experienced violence, there is no substitute for men and women like your speakers, who understand what at-risk youth are facing."

-Youth Center director, Greenfield

The war on the streets

VEP's programs evolved as new challenges evolved. In the mid 90s, our speakers began addressing an epidemic of youth violence and

handgun violence, and related problems, such as drug abuse, gangs and racism. These "prevention" programs offered kids positive role models. Veterans sometimes co-presented with non-

veterans (ex-gang members, ex-convicts and women survivors of violence), visiting classrooms and juvenile jails. In addition to awards from the National Council on Crime and Delinquency and other groups, VEP's ground-breaking prevention programs earned praise from local teachers and counselors.

A new century brings new wars and new challenges

The events of 9/11/2001 posed new challenges for VEP to address. Starting on the day the Trade Towers collapsed, through the weeks and months after, and into the Afghanistan invasion and the buildup to Iraq, VEP vets shared their stories, encouraging something that seemed in short supply: a measured consideration of war's consequences and potential alternatives to war. Through the four years of war in Iraq, VEP vets have continued to speak up. Our speakers now include veterans of these 21st Century conflicts and military family members.

VEP began a support group for military families last December.

Another project encourages women impacted by war to be speakers. And VEP continues its prevention programs. We are working with the largest homeless veterans' center in our region, training selected residents at the United Veterans of America to share their stories of war, military service, and lessons of their victories and defeats struggling with the legacies of combat trauma,

"VEP reaches a broad audience because your veterans speak with the credibility of first-hand experience. Peace activists attend VEP events, but so do ROTC candidates. VEP does not just preach to the converted; it changes minds."

-An Army veteran of Afghanistan active in VEP

addiction and prison. Youth are listening and learning, and participating vets can experience healing through sharing.

As we begin the journey to our 50th anniversary, we thank our volunteer speakers for their dedication. With their invaluable and widely varied stories—and the continued kind support of donors and foundations—we will continue to make a difference in the ways people understand the realities of war and violence.

Varied events focus on wars in Iraq and Afghanistan

The conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan were forefront at VEP presentations in many schools and public venues. Veterans and military family members shared stories and insights, sometimes after probing films such as “The Ground Truth,” screened at Hampshire College and UMass. VEP speakers and guests such as Charlie Richardson and Nancy Lessen from the group Military Families Speak Out discussed the war’s impact on veterans, families and Iraqi civilians. One event, at Congregation B’nai Israel in Northampton, explored the role faith can play coping with the horror of war. Here are two examples of the VEP-sponsored programs offered in Amherst, Gardner, Greenfield, Springfield and other communities.

The medical impact of war on soldier and civilian

Soldiers’ wounds, disabilities, the psychic burden soldiers carry with them, a crisis in Iraq’s medical system and the suffering of injured civilians—all are part of the toll of the Iraq war. And all were among topics discussed at “The Medical Consequences of the War in Iraq,” a day-long conference for Western Mass. medical personnel organized by Physicians for Social Responsibility (PSR) and co-sponsored by VEP, the V.A. Springfield Vets Center, and Baystate Medical Center. VEP speakers and local V.A. staff joined national medical experts.

In addition to scrutinizing serious medical issues facing returning U.S. troops, such as loss of limbs, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Traumatic Brain Injury, the conference studied the medical crisis Iraqi civilians face. Since the 2003 invasion of Iraq, 18,000 of the country’s 35,000 doctors have fled, said conference presenter Dr. Gene Bolles, a former neurosurgery chief at the U.S. Military Medical Center in Germany, where seriously wounded soldiers are treated. Another 2,000 have been killed, and many others have been kidnapped. Dr. Barry Levy, a past president of the American Public Health Association, spoke in detail of the public health situation in Iraq, noting medical systems in crisis before the U.S. invasion were now significantly worse.

Treating the mental wounds of war

At a panel on identifying and treating PTSD, Dr. Andrew Pomerantz, chairman of the psychiatry department at the White River Junction (VT) VA Medical Center noted more than 30 percent of veterans who served in Iraq or Afghanistan suffer mental health disorders. Symptoms, he said, include avoidance, nervousness, hyper-irritability, anger, and “intrusive memories,” including nightmares. David Bressemer, team leader and counselor at the Springfield Vets Center and a Vietnam combat veteran, commented that leaving behind a “combat zone mentality” is an arduous process of “unlearning” survival instincts ingrained in wartime.

During the panel, a couple in the National Guard, Kimberly and John Pajak—who

served in Iraq and Afghanistan, respectively—gave a gripping account of coping with PTSD.

“When I first came back I didn’t know what was wrong with me,” Kimberley Pajak said. “I tried to jump in, but within four days little things—like shopping and driving my son to school—got really tough... I couldn’t leave my house for six months. Now I can do more, but it’s still a work in progress.”

Local doctor Ira Helfand, a former president of U.S. PSR and a local PSR organizer, thought the event provided important information about challenges many vets face on homecoming. “People know the war’s costs in terms of dollars, and the [then] 3,200 dead and the 24,000 injured, but they may not know it causes lifelong problems for vets and their families,” he said.

A Marine reflects on winning Iraqi hearts and minds

Marine Captain Tyler Boudreau went to Iraq in 2004 primed for “stability operations”: building schools, handing out soccer balls, sharing food and other acts to win the “hearts and minds” of Iraqis. Now a veteran, VEP speaker and UMass student, he told an audience at a Mt. Wachusett Community College he genuinely wanted to avoid heavy-handed tactics.

However, once his unit entered the dangerous Sunni Triangle area, the helpful operations fell apart. “The shooting started, and we shot back,” he remembered. Taking heavy

casualties, the Marines switched to responding to attacks, searching for insurgents and manning vehicle checkpoints.

The fog of war

“At checkpoints, we looked for weapons and explosives and fired on any car refusing to stop,” the veteran said. Many civilian Iraqis, confused or frightened, did not halt. For every car that contained a bomb, his troops shot at 10 to 12 other cars that did not. Casualties and deaths among innocent civilians far exceeded the numbers of insurgents captured or killed. “And you can imagine what that did for the civilians’ hearts and minds,” he said.

Boudreau explained how the stress of combat and the losses of comrades hardened troops to war by describing a search operation prompted by a series of attacks that killed and wounded many Marines. Members of his battalion subsequently trashed houses, rifled through personal belongings and arrested all military-aged men for questioning.

“At the time it made sense to me,” Boudreau said. Later, though, he began questioning the impact of his actions and the whole U.S. occupation. After returning home from Iraq, disillusioned by his war experience, he decided to forgo plans for a long career in the military. He left the Marines and entered UMass in 2006, where he plans to do graduate study.

“In my opinion, our operations in Iraq do not have the effect we’re looking for,” he told the Mt. Wachusett students. “The U.S. military does some good and succeeds in many humanitarian missions. Yet, in the eyes of the Iraqis, that does not make up for the damage we are doing.”

A question Boudreau posed to the class summed up the paradox he sees in the occupation and the anger many Iraqis hold: “How do you think you’d feel if some people came along and built you a school and then shot your kid the next day?”

Visit Tyler’s blog at www.deeperthanwars.blogspot.com



Military patrols, checkpoints, raids and violence in Iraq terrify and anger civilians, nullifying U.S. attempts at winning “hearts and minds,” in the opinion of Iraq vet Tyler Boudreau.

Family connection grows

By Susan Leary, VEP Program Coordinator

The current war in Iraq impacts military family members far more than the rest of us. While their neighbors go about business as usual, these parents, sisters, brothers, spouses and children constantly feel the reality of war. Worry begins early, perhaps with basic training. Deployment overseas brings 24 hour fear and stress that few understand. Even the joy of a safe return comes with challenges, worry about the effects of war, struggles with military bureaucracy, and potential re-deployment.

Local military family members are meeting twice a month at the VEP office to share their concerns, anger, sorrow and care with others who do understand. Group members may hear of struggles to help a returned soldier get counseling, or the pain of a young marriage near the breaking point, or the terror of a strange car in the driveway during a deployment. They offer each other understanding, strategies for coping, and contacts who might help.

The need continues

The peer-led group was originally planned from Dec. to June, but group members extended meetings through the summer and into the fall. More than 70 people came to an outreach and fundraising event for the group held at Yankee Candle's Chandler's Tavern in Deerfield, and members may start a second group in the Greenfield area.

These group meetings are neither easy nor light, yet they fill a need to share real feelings with other military family members. Some in the group are speaking at VEP events, sharing their experience with the community.

We thank the Women's Fund of Western Massachusetts, Yankee Candle, and our generous donors for their support in helping to make this group possible. For more information call 413-253-4947.

VEP news briefs

Hail to the Chief: Stuart Bicknell of Amherst, Mass., was elected President of the Board at our June meeting. The Vietnam veteran and long-time VEP Board member is a psychologist and works as a counselor at Deerfield Academy. Stuart replaces Chris Myers, who had served as VEP's President since early 2004. He stepped down and remains a Director. We appreciate Chris' diligence to VEP's mission and work in the community, and his other contributions. All of us look forward to working with Stuart. Board member Judith Kundl assumed the Clerk position which Stuart vacated.

Collaborations galore: Taking the old adage "Many hands make light work" seriously, VEP has embarked on collaborations with a rainbow of groups and agencies. In addition to the collaborations noted in Update articles—with Physicians for Social Responsibility, The V.A. Vets Center, Baystate Medical, The United Veterans of America, the Umass Anti-war Coalition, Congregation B'Nai Israel and Wesley United Methodist Church—VEP participated in other collaborations, large and small, too numerous to list. One of the more extensive was a collaboration on public education events organized for Hunger Awareness Day. Led by The Food Bank of Western Mass., the project included VEP, The United Veterans of America (UVA) and human service agencies, churches and other faith organizations. A woman and two men from UVA who are VEP members were among the keynote speakers at public events in Pittsfield, Greenfield and Springfield. Pat Davis, Willie Ledbetter and Don Chevannes spoke in the first person about the hunger and homelessness among veterans and in the general community.

Foundation funding: A variety of foundations have awarded VEP funding for the coming school year, providing the

important fuel our programs need to continue. The Northampton Education Foundation provided a small grant to fund our work at the Florence Learning Center and at Smith Vocational H.S. The New Visions Foundation and The Peace Development Fund each elected to support our speaking programs related to the war in Iraq and our violence prevention programs for high-risk teens. The Women's Fund of Western Mass. recognized the important work VEP's military families group and speaking programs perform with women by renewing its 2006 grant for our Giving Voice to the Women of War project. The Gardiner Howland Shaw Foundation stepped up with funding for our expanding work with selected veteran residents of the United Veterans of America shelter in Leeds, whom we are training to share their personal stories and lessons in juvenile jails and other programs serving court-involved teens. And the Yankee Candle Company Foundation, moved by our work with military families, made an unrestricted donation. We also were very grateful to receive designated gifts from donors through the Community Foundation of Western Mass. and the Peace Development Fund.

Thanks to these foundations—and to our individual donors, whose tax-deductible gifts comprise more than half of our income. VEP's important programs forge ahead!

Conine Memorial project complete: We have finished the memorial tribute to the late Chuck Conine, a Vietnam veteran who passed away last year. VEP created the memorial—with Chuck's story, his picture and one of his poems about the war—to be framed and left at the National Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Relatives and friends of the Conines who contributed to VEP in Chuck's memory will receive a Memorial copy.

Please help us to celebrate VEP's 25th Birthday by making a tax-deductible donation to support our programs

The war in Iraq continues, problems such as youth violence are on the rise, and the need for VEP grows. Please consider a summer gift to support our programs

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This information is confidential. VEP does not share its donor list

VEP 25th Anniversary Newsletter, Summer Edition; See inside for more

Inspirational VEP speaker takes his story to the kids of NYC

VEP veteran Pablo Rodriguez, a recently-retired Northampton police officer, just moved to New York City, where he is training to be an elementary school teacher. We pay tribute here to his vital contributions, speaking for VEP in area schools.

Pablo spoke of surviving in a tough Springfield neighborhood, living on welfare assistance. He showed youth the consequences of drugs (which he avoided, but which claimed some of those closest to him). He also addressed teen parenting. A father at age 15, Pablo struggled to support a family, eventually as a single parent.

Shared from the heart, the story resonated with urban youth facing the same struggles and temptations he had overcome. In one city program for teens with gang affiliations and on juvenile probation, students were uneasy when the uniformed police

officer walked into the room. Yet they listened attentively, peppered him with questions, and even stayed after class to ask more.

To teens facing the oppression of poverty and the dangers of gangs, drugs, dropping out, teen pregnancy and more, Pablo's story is both eye-opening and inspirational. "Try. Take responsibility," he tells students. "Think about your future. It doesn't matter who you are, you can do it." And his personal story – of leaving Springfield's streets behind for a career as a highly-respected police officer and of raising as a single parent two daughters who went on to college – is proof positive that it can be done.

We'll miss Pablo. Thankfully, his story will continue to impact youth. We hope he'll visit and speak in local schools.

The legacy of the late Glenn Santos, educator and VEP speaker



Daily Hampshire Gazette

Long-time VEP speaker Glenn Santos, a teacher and assistant principal in the Springfield schools, died in an early July boating accident. The 58-year-old Vietnam veteran had shared his story with VEP in many classrooms, including those in his own inner-city middle school.

A pilot in Vietnam in 1969 and 70, Glenn was badly wounded when his helicopter was shot down. He shared his harrowing story skillfully, de-glorifying combat, and encouraging kids to respect others, to eschew violence and to value helping others. Even the wise guys in the back of the room sat in awe and listened! He was proud of his military service, yet opposed to "waving the patriotic flag" (his words) in classrooms. Part of his message to students, as quoted in a 2000 newspaper interview: "War is unnecessary. There should be other ways for people to solve their problems."

Glenn was buried in Veterans Memorial Cemetery in Agawam and leaves his wife, Alison, and his grown son, Craig. The Santos family suggested that Glenn's friends and colleagues donate to the VEP in his memory. We were grateful to be so honored.

*Celebrating twenty five years of veterans
Sharing stories that de-glorify war and violence*

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