

Vietnam Memories: Stories Left at the Wall

A Traveling Museum Sponsored by: The Jersey Explorer Children's Museum,
NJ Youth Corps, NJ City University, The National Park Service
& the Vietnam Veterans of America

Project Mission

Visitors have been leaving personal items at the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial since "the Wall" was dedicated in 1982. People have left thousands of personal items of all types: photographs and letters, war medals and football helmets, car keys and rosary beads.

They bring cherished, raggedy teddy bears and sonograms of children who never met their fathers. They've left wedding pictures, basketballs and the dresses that newborn babies have worn home from the hospital. They bring these items, by the hundreds each month, as gifts to their sons and fathers, husbands and buddies. This powerful collection, in the care of the National Park Service, now numbers over 100,000 personal items. 100,000 stories that can teach our children lessons that go well beyond the history books.

Our mission is to share some of these stories that have been left at the wall. We want to use this collection to teach young people about war and about the impact that war has on individuals, on families and on communities. We also want to use this collection to teach our children about courage and about friendship; about a mother's love for her child and about how painful loss is to the people left behind. We want to use the sacred treasures in this collection to help young people to better understand both their history and their own lives.

Program Design

The Traveling Museum and the Accompanying Education Program

Vietnam Memories is a traveling museum that showcases over 180 items from this national collection, along with photographs and mounted letters. The Vietnam Veterans of America will be bringing the traveling museum, the assembly program and workshop program to high schools, middle schools and colleges throughout the Rockland County area.

Program Components:

- **The Traveling Museum Exhibit:**
Our team, the staff of the Jersey Explorer Children's Museum, will convert an ordinary 900 to 1200 square foot classroom or school multipurpose room into a museum for a 4 to 6 week show. We will bring our own carpets, lighting and wall units. We will completely transform the room with 20 display cases, over 100 mounted photographs and letters, a stage set of a teenagers bedroom from the 1960's and approximately 180 personal mementos that were left at the wall in Washington DC. The exhibit has been in dozens of schools and has been seen by over 75,000 people.
- **The Assembly Program**
Every exhibit run at a high school or middle school opens with school-wide assembly programs. Student and teachers from the host school, along with veterans from the VVA help to present a program of slides on the war followed by a reading of letters that people have left at the memorial. The assembly runs approximately 40 minutes and has been warmly received by over 30,000 students and teachers in the northern New Jersey/Rockland County area.
- **The Classroom Program**
Volunteers, all combat veterans and members of the VVA, visit history and English classes after the students have been in the museum to answer questions and to talk with students about their experiences. This new, oral history, component of the program has proved to be tremendously popular with both students and teachers. The chance for the students to actually interview people "who were there" enables us to help teachers in bringing history alive for young audiences that are too often uninterested in studying about their own past.
- **The Presentation Staff of the Traveling Museum**
This project is staffed by a unique team that includes young high school dropouts, college students who have volunteered for AmeriCorps and veterans who are members of the local chapter of the Vietnam Veterans of America. When students come to traveling museum room in their school, on this "in school field trip," they are met by an exhibit presenters. The presenters have two jobs: First - to explain the wall and the collection and to help our young visitors to appreciate and to learn from the personal stories and memories. Second - to help to bring the history of the war to life for students who may only know it from movies and history books.