

The Vietnam War Era's Local Voices: Let's Listen

by Robert J. Kodosky, *Historical Commissioner*, and Madelyne Maychak, *WCU history major*

So, there we stood. Officer Jimenez and me. As we eyed one another warily, I could only imagine the headline: "West Chester University (WCU) Professor bailed out by students after a run in with the United States Capitol Police. Story at 11." That never transpired. Good thing. I am not sure my students would have bailed me out. They appeared a little too amused by it all.

"Dr. K's Capitol Confusion," as it quickly became known on campus, occurred during a field trip to Washington, DC in April 2022. Three generations of military veterans accompanied a group of WCU students to visit the Vietnam Veterans Memorial before meeting with United States Representative Chrissy Houlahan.

The journey proceeded accordingly as it neared the time to meet at the Capitol. Like many a professor, I misplaced my students. Frantically, we texted to locate one another and, it turned out, I went to the wrong side of the building. With a tight window to meet with Rep. Houlahan, I sprinted to find my students, oblivious to the barricaded area I cut through. I failed to notice the motorcade idling in my path as well.

As officer Jimenez stopped me to point these things out, my cell phone rang. I answered my phone carefully to hear the voice of Rep. Houlahan's aide on the other end of the line. Sensing officer Jimenez's skepticism, I handed him the phone. Surprisingly, he took it. Rep. Houlahan soon joined us and officer Jimenez's colleague offered to drive her to find my students. After they pulled out, my students, looking for me, came around the corner. Seinfeld could not script it better.

Officer Jimenez radioed his colleague and Rep. Houlahan's squad car soon reappeared. All ended as well as it began that morning at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. There, a representative from the United States of America Vietnam War Commemoration, a national program established in 2012 under the secretary of defense, greeted the group when it arrived. He presented each Vietnam veteran with a Vietnam Veteran Lapel pin as an official token of the nation's gratitude.

This ceremonial gesture offered a welcome home that eluded many Vietnam veterans when they initially returned. Instead, they received scrutiny. As one veteran recalled to a student, "I was told if you had any brains, you wouldn't have gone to Vietnam. And my answer to that was, you don't understand how the army works." Another remembered, "I was two or three years younger than you and they put you in a situation where you don't know how you are getting out of it."

For students like Madelyne Maychak, a history major, such firsthand accounts generate historical insights not located in textbooks. Every story matters. Each perspective is unique and promotes an understanding of the era's complexity. One veteran

observed, "There were people pro-war and anti-war, but a bunch of people like me in the middle, trying to figure out what to do with it." Such testimony enables students to grasp the confusion, the ambiguity of the time. It further establishes a personal connection to the past, illuminating the individual impact of sweeping events.

As the group in D.C. worked to reconcile past and present, it ventured across the Mall to the World War II Memorial, a significant space for Vietnam War veterans as well. One veteran made clear the connection, "Some were kind of dreading the draft and others, I guess because the greatest generation is the one that raised us. You know, we felt a calling to duty."

For many veterans, that call to duty brought sacrifices that remain ongoing. One reflected about the chemical defoliant Agent Orange, "They didn't know anything about this stuff." They just said, "it will kill the foliage and expose the enemy so we said 'Let's go! You know, they didn't tell you that this stuff was going to kill you, your kids, your grandkids, your great grandkids.'"

The exchanges that took place that day on the National Mall proved invaluable. For many of the era's participants, the war's aftermath rendered an uncomfortable silence. According to the acclaimed combat psychiatrist Jonathan Shays, trauma survivors require for healing the knowledge that "enough of the truth of their experience is understood, remembered and retold with enough fidelity to carry some of this truth." The excursion to Washington, D.C. capped the first part of an oral history project at WCU that aims to do just that.

Students spent the first part of the spring semester (2022) learning about the Vietnam War era and considered how the events of the time resonated locally. This aimed to prepare them to conduct oral history interviews with individuals who volunteered to share their experiences. Participants included WCU retired faculty and former students, members of the American Helicopter Museum and Education Center, local Vietnamese, the Chester County Marine Corps League and Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter 436.

Students received training and support from several internationally renowned oral historians, including ones from the defense department's Vietnam War Commemoration. They submitted their oral histories, video recorded, to the Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History at the University of Kentucky. This fall at WCU, students will build a website to exhibit the interviews digitally. A physical exhibit and book project are also in the works.

Students conducted forty interviews and collected over one hundred photos and artifacts from local veterans and activists. Student interns worked over the summer to prepare building



the website, continue the interviews, and further research the local history. One of them, Madelyne Maychak, notes that on October 15, 1969, a National Day of Conscience Protests, three hundred and fifty students from West Chester State College protested in front of the County Courthouse. Such activism continued in the following years.

In 1971, a delegation of students from West Chester joined forty thousand others in the nation's capital as part of the May Day protests that resulted in several getting arrested. Three years later, in an event organized by the Veterans Action Committee, a group of West Chester Students once again traveled to Washington, D.C. to demand an increase in G.I. Bill benefits. According to Maychak, her research for this project "furthers student education of local history and its connection to larger historical events." For project participants, she suggests, oral history offers the "opportunity to feel safe and speak up about their involvement during the war."

2025 will mark fifty years since America's involvement in Vietnam concluded. The sons and daughters of the country's "Greatest Generation" grow smaller. Recording their stories now is essential. They reflect lifetimes committed to President John F. Kennedy's calling, "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country." They continue to inspire.

The Vietnam generation's members did not always agree about how to best serve. One veteran recalls telling a protestor, "I said, look, we have both done things that we're not going to apologize for, but we better live with it." Whichever side, though, all concurred about the need for engagement and the value of service. They repeatedly exhibited the willingness to uphold the integrity of their nation's ideals. Their stories offer lessons that remain as vital now as then. Let's listen.