Teaching Vietnam

By: Lindy G. Poling

Since I was a child, I have loved the study of history, but as a young teacher I quickly discovered that not all of my students shared my passion. So I began experimenting with different methods to make the learning of history more inviting. One of the most successful methods has proven to be inviting guest speakers into the classroom. During the past twelve semesters, I have been using this instructional approach which I call the Community-in-the-Classroom to teach a popular high school elective called the Lessons of Vietnam (LOV). I invite as many as twenty well-informed visitors into our classroom to help students investigate and better understand what was happening, both at home and abroad, during the Vietnam Era.

Not surprisingly, students are less interested in instructional strategies that rely on lecture and teacher-directed thinking which often emphasize coverage at the expense of understanding. Instead of making an unbroken march through the textbook version of what happened in Vietnam, my students and I delve into the important ideas and lessons of this historical period with a team of volunteer "guest teachers" who work to support the LOV class both inside and outside the classroom. There is really so much we can learn from the legacy of this war, and students will learn it better if we expose them directly to the Vietnam veterans of the U.S. military, their spouses, former ARVN soldiers, war correspondents, people who were active in the U.S. peace movement in the 1960's and 1970's, authors, clergy, refugees and others who have an important personal history and association with this controversial era.

Whenever people ask me to explain why it is so important to have "all these guest speakers" come into the classroom, I am apt to respond by saying that it is similar to the strategy of an art history teacher who takes her students to a museum or art gallery. The most well-organized lecture on early Italian Renaissance painters cannot compete with actually seeing the masterpieces of Titian and Leonardo. Like an original work of art, guest speakers and their personal stories can have a similarly captivating, visceral effect on students. Students who view history as boring will be disarmed by the experience of having a Vietnam veteran, like Carl Bimbo, share pictures with the class of his lost buddies. These special visitors will interact with students, field their questions, challenge their suppositions, and sometimes they will even "try out new ideas." For example, General George B. Price, paused near the end of his presentation to our LOV class last spring, looked at every student in the room and said, "Your challenge as Americans is to find the profits of peace." Some of the real lessons of Vietnam are lifelong lessons in character development, such as the courage it took for many returning veterans to overcome an indifferent, if not hostile, American public.

I also try to identify "learning opportunities" for students that go beyond the classroom, such as participating in a spring field trip to Washington, DC; organizing special dinners for veterans, parents and community leaders; or working on our nationally recognized newsletter, Bridges. Students respond enthusiastically to special activities like a newsletter, because they are encouraged to use a variety of resources, interpret their findings, and write about the lessons they have learned regarding the Vietnam experience.

I have found that high school students are capable of great initiative, creativity, and amazingly high levels of "performance" when they are challenged to "think outside the box." I do not swamp my pupils with a myriad of facts and information about the Vietnam War. And, I do not lecture them on how many Americans were killed and wounded in Vietnam. Instead, Veteran Carl Bimbo tells them at point-blank range in our classroom that he lost his best buddy there. Later in the semester, Carl will accompany us on our LOV class field trip to Washington, DC. And there at The Wall, he will hoist a student up on his shoulders to rub the name of his lost buddy. In this way, students come to appreciate that every one of the 58,226 names on this Wall has individual significance...And, they want to know, as do surviving friends and family members, "What for?"