

The Vietnam Memorial Wall And Its Impact On Society

By Corwin Pederson

For my essay I chose to interview my dad, Kevin Pederson. I chose him because I have talked with him many times about Vietnam, war as a whole and just life in general. I have found that he and I have a lot of the same feelings about war and humanity.

When I interviewed my dad for this essay he wanted me to stress the fact that Vietnam veterans never received a homecoming when they came back home. They felt no recognition for their sacrifices and the ultimate sacrifices of their fallen friends. Not only did they not receive a homecoming, but due to strong political opinions of the people back home, were often the target of American citizens' frustration. Some were booed, spit on and called baby killers. The veterans, family members and all of society needed help to begin the healing process. The 1982 dedication marked the beginning of that healing process.

On November 13th 1982, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial was dedicated as a national monument. This was an obvious sign of recognition and honor.

The Vietnam Memorial Wall is set in the grassy park of Constitution Gardens. The wall is neither prominent, grand nor imposing, rather simple, thoughtful and profound. The story of the wall from beginning to end is recorded on the wall. It contains the names of 58,249 men and women who were killed or remain missing from the war. The names appear in order of which they died or were declared missing. Finding a name would be like finding bodies on the battlefield, the names of those who served and died together would remain together on the wall. Not one name on the wall appears more meaningful or important than any other. The names begin at the center of the wall and continue down each panel towards the right end of the wall like pages in a book. The list resumes at the left side of the wall and continues back toward the center, here at the bottom is the last death. The wars' beginning and end meet, the war is 'complete', coming full circle. By illustrating the war has come to completion encourages visitors to move on to the next step of coping with their feelings about the war and those who served. The circular layout of the names may also suggest that the healing of the nation has come full circle. When looking at the black granite of the wall, the images of the present, like the grass, trees, sky and visitors are intermixed with the names of the past symbolically bridging the past with the present helping visitors deal with the past. The reflections of the wall may also encourage visitors to reflect on the war, those who had served, its impact on society, the healing that the nation has achieved and the healing that has yet to be accomplished.

The Vietnam Memorial Wall serves as a testament to the sacrifices of American military personnel and recognizes and honors the men and women who served. The memorial grew out of the need to heal the nation without making a political statement about the war. This was no time for opinions, it was time to heal. The memorial is a place where everyone can come together and remember and honor those who served without being subject to any political statements. The wall makes people aware of the impact of war and makes them understand that the price of war has to be paid in human lives.

The wall is a place where veterans can find closure. It has become an altar of sorts, a place where people leave offerings, men pay off old debts with dollars, cigarettes or cans of beer. It allows veterans and families to confront feelings that have been repressed for years and make peace with themselves and others as pain and guilt are released. Its more than a way to honor those who served, it has become a way to heal.

I recall when I visited the wall with my dad and the rest of my family. Before we visited the wall I didn't really understand how important this trip was to our family, me being so young and all. It soon became very clear.

When we visited the wall it looked like a normal park with people lying in the grass, sitting on park benches, etc. When we got close to the wall we noticed that the walkway in front of the wall was under construction and was roped off. My dad wanted to get some etchings and I thought he wasn't going to be able to. My dad climbed over the rope and walked up to the wall and started looking for names. He was approached by park personnel. I thought he was going to get in trouble. The park worker put her arm around him and gave him authentic memorial paper, replacing his notebook paper. It was then that I really started to understand. I looked around and noticed what was happening. I looked at everyone who was there. They were looking at my dad, my father, with honor. Looking at 58,249 names, looking at 58,250 heroes.

In closing I want to thank all of the veterans for their sacrifices and I am very proud to be an associate member of the NVVA. I believe it is a great organization that does a lot of good for a lot of people. It would be an honor to accept the award at the Vietnam War Memorial.