

IN PERSON; Remembering Vietnam

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WHEN Patricia Kolodi started teaching history in the 1980's at Haddonfield Memorial High School, she remembers a student raising his hand during a lesson on Grover Cleveland and saying, "When are we going to get to the good stuff?"

So Mrs. Kolodi asked the students what they considered "good stuff." To a person, they responded, "The 1960's."

It was that conversation that began 11 years of teaching about the Vietnam War, first to high school students and later to their parents.

Today, Mrs. Kolodi's course is taught throughout South Jersey, where teachers from neighboring districts ask for copies of the curriculum and veterans in the area have come to depend on their invitation to the classes to address the students.

This fall, Mrs. Kolodi is leaving Haddonfield Memorial High School to teach history at a Catholic school in suburban Philadelphia. But in the spring she will resume teaching her night course in Haddonfield. The course will still be offered to high school students, though with a new teacher.

"I wanted to teach these kids in an unbiased fashion what life was like in America in the 60's and 70's," said the 47-year-old Mrs. Kolodi, who at the time was growing up in Linden and later attended St. Francis College, a small school in western Pennsylvania. "Was I going to be drafted? What would I do if I were drafted?"

Mrs. Kolodi also felt a strong bond with the veterans, who did not receive much recognition when they returned home after their tours of duty in Southeast Asia. She wanted her students to appreciate what they had done, regardless of whether they thought the war was right or wrong.

"It's never too late to welcome these vets home," she said.

After Mrs. Kolodi's initial conversation with her students, she asked the Haddonfield administration if she could teach a course on Vietnam. When it agreed, she spent a year researching the subject and quickly found that very few schools were teaching the era in American history -- either the war itself or the turmoil at home.

"Some social studies folks try to avoid the whole subject of war," said Dr. John Dougherty, social studies coordinator for the state Department of Education, though he added that he himself did not agree with that philosophy. "Let's teach history the way it happened."

Dr. Dougherty acknowledged that more than 30 years later -- and with diplomatic relations restored -- Vietnam was "still a sensitive area that needs to be presented with a balanced view."

Education

Last winter, some of New Jersey's teachers attended a seminar on teaching about Vietnam, at the University of Pennsylvania's Foreign Policy Research Institute. This year, Dr. Dougherty said he hoped that representatives from the institute would speak about Vietnam at a fall meeting of the New Jersey Council for the Social Studies. "I think it's a good idea and it's consistent with our curriculum," he said.

Mrs. Kolodi said she remembered sitting in the student union at St. Francis watching news about the fall of Saigon. "I wondered, 'What's going on?'"

When the veterans began to come home, it struck her that this war was so unlike any other in America's past. Mrs. Kolodi talked about how her grandmother -- who lived with her family and worked in New York City -- told stories about the World War II veterans and their return to America. Her grandmother had seen veterans welcomed home with parades.

"My grandmother helped instill in me a love for history," she said. But as she watched the Vietnam veterans return, she thought: "This is so different than what my grandmother told me. But I just didn't understand enough about it."

Attending college in rural Loretto, Pa., she did not take part in any anti-war protests, nor did she even witness any.

But Vietnam has become more personal to her over the years, and she has visited there five times in the past 10 years. Her husband, Bill, had a cousin who was declared missing in action in February 1969.

"Emotionally, it's a difficult course for me to teach," she said. But the course -- which starts in 200 B.C. and goes to the end of the war in 1975 -- also has a huge emotional effect on the students.

Every year, Mrs. Kolodi gives a homework assignment in which students must call a veteran and thank him or her for what they have done. If it is a Vietnam veteran, they must also say, "Welcome home."

One year, a girl in Mrs. Kolodi's class called a former neighbor, thanked him and welcomed him home. The man did not say much, Mrs. Kolodi said, but later his wife called and said, "Thank you for the gift you just gave our family."

She told the student that for the first time, her husband talked to them about Vietnam and for the first time, someone said thank you and welcome home.

Students who have taken the course all recall the trip to the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial in Washington, the speakers and the passion Mrs. Kolodi has for the subject.

"I felt that the way she taught, she brought so much enthusiasm to her teaching," said Dave Goldberg, 18, of Haddonfield, who will enter Loyola University in Baltimore this fall. "You just wanted to learn. Vietnam was one of the best classes I took throughout high school because of the attitude she brought to the class."

Education

Students like 19-year-old Brian Chew, who now attends Washington & Lee University in Virginia, said it was the speakers he found most moving.

"She made me realize there's more to history than just the facts," Brian said. "There are human stories in history."

Emily Vick, 19, now a sophomore at Catholic University in Washington, said she knew nothing about the Vietnam War until she took the course during her senior year. "It's the forgotten war," Emily said. Since taking the class, she has been to the wall five times, and each time she thanks veterans there and welcomes them home.

One of the most powerful lessons for the students is when Mrs. Kolodi brings in the draft lottery numbers for the students. She goes around the room and tells the teenagers one by one whether they would be able to stay home or if they would be drafted.

"I love my students," she said. "I look at them and say, 'This is who we were sending to Vietnam.' When they hear that the veterans were there at 18 years old, that's when reality hits."

Now she plans to incorporate the subject into her classes at Mount St. Joseph's Academy in Flourtown, Pa. And here in Haddonfield, the principal, Joseph Serico, said there was no question that the course would continue to be taught.

"She's left behind a wonderful legacy with this course," Dr. Serico said of Mrs. Kolodi, noting that about 75 percent of the school's seniors choose to take the class each year.

Many teachers go from private and religious schools to public districts because of higher pay and better benefits. But Mrs. Kolodi, who attended 16 years of Catholic school in New Jersey and did her graduate studies at Seton Hall University in South Orange, said she wanted to spend her last years of teaching in that environment.

"Before I retire, I want to give back to that school system that gave me so much," she said.