

I first visited the New Jersey Vietnam War Memorial with my history class and teacher, Mr. Bello, during my junior year of high school at Hopewell Valley Central High School. Before our trip we were studying the Vietnam War, a topic that my teacher, Mr. Bello, was particularly passionate about. He assigned us a project to honor a soldier who served in the Vietnam War, was from New Jersey, and was killed on our birthday. I didn't put much thought into it at first. I was handed the assignment and looked at it as just another project I needed to do well on.

As the unit continued, we learned more and more about what our soldiers had to endure in Vietnam. One story about a soldier's arrival home stuck in my mind. I imagined the scene where people spit on them as they came off the plane. Some threw away their uniforms so that nobody would know there were in the war. We watched a video of, now old men, telling the story of coming home and not being honored. The lack of respect offended every sense of my being.

I went to Mr. Bello after class with tears in my eyes and asked him what I could do. I told him I needed to do something for these soldiers. His response was, "If I tell you what to do, it's not your idea. It's not as special. Think from your heart and you'll find something." I went home and looked up the soldier I was assigned. I read his story and at that moment he became a part of me. His name was Bobby Catling. He was born July 29th 1946 and died on my birthday, July 3rd in 1966. He was a hero, and his death helped save many lives. I knew then he could never be remembered with just a poster or a power point. So I honored him the best way I knew how.

When I arrived home from my visit to the memorial I couldn't stop thinking about all the men and women that died in the Vietnam War and their sacrifices. I especially couldn't stop thinking about Bobby. I felt sympathy and empathy towards the war before my visit to the memorial but there was something about seeing the actual names of 1,562

people on the wall. It was something tangible that could be touched. Seeing Bobby's name on the wall made my heart sink. When I ran my fingers over his name I felt a feeling that I could never explain. During my research I felt like I really got to know him, and seeing his name at the memorial made me grasp that he was a real person, that every name on that wall belonged to a person, a person who was just like me. Bobby was twenty years old when he died, only three years older than I am today. Seeing the letters in the educational center also had an effect on me. It was another thing that humanized the war and made it more relatable. Visiting the memorial helped me realize that the Vietnam War was not just another history lesson or a chapter in a textbook. It was something real and everyone involved needed and deserved to be remembered.

I wrote a song for Bobby entitled Bobby's Witness. Mr. Bello's project, visiting the memorial, writing this song, and mostly Bobby, helped me realize how important our soldiers are. They are willing to fight for their country and risk their lives so that we can live in safety. This experience changed me and made me beyond grateful for everything they do for us. I contacted Bobby's only remaining brother, and he couldn't have been more thankful for the song I had written. He said his brother was never properly honored until now and hearing those words was a feeling that is indescribable. Talking to Bobby's brother and hearing how my song affected him changed my life forever.

This project and the effect it had on me has inspired me to be part of a committee at my school, the Hopewell Valley Vietnam War Memorial Committee. Mr. Bello, myself and ten other students have begun to raise money to build a memorial at our school for the two men, Richard Stephens and Bruce Backes, who graduated from Hopewell Valley and were killed in Vietnam. We are calling this project "Operation Welcome Home" so that we can give these men the welcome home that they deserve. I've been blessed with the honor and opportunity to write and perform a song for Bruce and Richard at the unveiling. I've also been privileged with the chance to meet with several of their family members and look forward to commemorating them with my song at the opening of the memorial on Memorial Day weekend.

Talking to Bobby's brother, hearing how my song affected him and building the memorial at my school, as well as visiting the New Jersey Vietnam War Memorial, has had a major influence and impact on me, and it has impacted the rest of my life. Not only did it humanize the Vietnam War and every other past, current and future war, but it helped determine my future. I discovered music therapy, and I realized how much music can affect a person's life. I can't imagine anything better than getting to help people every day through something I love. Music therapy is something that I've chosen to go to college for and hope that one day I can help soldiers who come home from war with PTSD. My birthday is no longer just about the day I was born. It's about a hero who died and served his country. I'm thankful every day that I was assigned Mr. Bello's project, because it has helped me honor Bobby and now Richard and Bruce. I also now know what my future could hold, and I couldn't be more ready for the adventure.

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