

NJ Vietnam Veterans' Memorial Foundation
2014 Scholarship Winner

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New Jersey Vietnam Veterans' Memorial Scholarship

The New Jersey Vietnam Veterans' Memorial is a paradox of tranquility and pain. I went to visit on a cold windy Saturday and was amazed at the sheer beauty and simplicity of the Memorial. It is somber yet elegant. At this moment in time all I can think about are the brave men who died. Many of these heroes were not much older than I am. As I gaze at the black panels, I can't believe that New Jersey lost so many of its own. The panels surround me and make me feel very insignificant. I realize that this is not about individuals it is about a brotherhood.

As I gaze at the three statues I am ashamed to admit that I forgot about the key role women played in the war. I wasn't prepared to be so affected by the statues but I was. The statues are bigger than life which suggests the Herculean task they attempted to accomplish. The soldier on the floor looks so lifelike it is disturbing, which I assume was the intent. The emotional connection between the African American soldier, the Hispanic nurse and the Caucasian soldier is electric. The night before it must have rained and water had collected in the crevices of the sculptures. No one was here yet for the tour. I don't know why but I dipped my fingers in the water and trickled a trail of tears from each of the statues eyes. My mom looked at me oddly and I said, "I just thought I could help them cry."

When the tour began the strangest thing happened, our tour guide Dan asked us to look at the circle of pavers before us. He told us that from a helicopter you could see that the pavers had been shaped in a tear drop to represent all the tears that had been shed here. Before the tour was over several people had tears in their eyes including our burly tour guide who spoke of his son and his three year old granddaughter. They both have liver problems which he believes resulted from his exposure to chemicals in Vietnam. Dan took us on more than a tour, he took us back to the jungles of Vietnam and put a face and a smile on the word hero.

I came from a military family. My father is a disabled retired Major in the Army and my grandfathers both served. My grandfather, a Lieutenant Colonel in the Air Force said he can trace our ancestor's military careers back to the Civil War. My whole life all I heard about was the military and the need to give back. However, it is not until this moment that I truly get it. There is a quiet eerie silence as people search for names of their loved ones. It is almost as if they need proof that their lives mattered. These men were real, they were scared, they were brave, and they are my heroes.

The visual memorial is perfect. It tells a story of unity. It depicts a journey into the unknown. As I walk through the tunnel I suddenly feel small and insignificant. I am worried and nervous about college. Yet, these men and women went half way around the world and didn't complain. They didn't even know if they would ever come back. They saw unspeakable things and suffered severe psychological and physical pain. I think every senior needs to take a break from SATs and college applications and come here to get some perspective. Suddenly my concerns seem so small and so manageable. I can't help but wonder what their lives would have been like. Dan explains that many of these men were drafted because they weren't in college. You can hear a pin drop as each student here realizes how lucky they are. It makes me realize that because of these brave heroes I live in a world where I still have choices.

Life is a circle just like the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial. At the beginning of the tour I put tears in the eyes of the statues and by the end of the tour the statues had put tears in my eyes. I want to make my life count. My dream is to study criminal justice and become a member of the police force. I am struck by the children who comfort a parent or who hold on extra tight to a grandparent. They seem to sense how important this place is. I don't know if I could do what these heroes did but I do want to dedicate my life to making the world a bit safer in my own way.