

Written Public Testimony
Submitted to the Interior, Environment and Related Agencies Subcommittee Committee on
Appropriations, U.S. House of Representatives Regarding
FY 2021 Funding for the National Endowment for the Humanities
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I am pleased to write in support of the National Endowment for the Humanities on behalf of the National Humanities Alliance.

I am a student at Jefferson Community College in Watertown, NY--home to Fort Drum. I am a retired Navy Veteran, an aircraft mechanic by trade. I deployed twelve times including a seven-month deployment to Iraq and a thirteen-month deployment to Afghanistan.

In 2018, the college offered a class for military combat Veterans called Dialogues of Honor and Sacrifice. The class, made possible by a National Endowment for Humanities grant, was intended to teach the history, literature, and art of the Civil, Vietnam, and Iraq Wars.

I was drawn to this course because I wanted to better understand my Uncle's experience. He is an Army Veteran who had been shot twice during the Vietnam War and was awarded two Purple Hearts. I remember my uncle as being intimidating, quiet and a scary man who wanted nothing to do with me. We hadn't spoken more than two full sentences to one another by the time I left to join the Navy in 1996.

Nonetheless, I visited my uncle every chance I could during my time in the Navy, but nothing was as special as the visits after I had experienced real combat deployments. Now, seeing me as a fellow combat veteran, he let down his guard. He smiled, he laughed and even joked around. My uncle was now able to talk, even if just a little bit, about his experience in Vietnam. Knowing I could relate, he let me see the guilty pain he had been harboring for years. Guilty for wanting to be proud of wearing his Army uniform even after being spat on when he stepped off the plane. Guilty for being able to come back home to his family, unlike so many brothers who lost their lives in front of him.

It was not until another tour in Afghanistan that I grew more like my uncle. When I returned, I began to self-medicate with alcohol or was working out six times a week for about two hours a day to the point of exhaustion. My relationship with my husband, children, and family were severely strained. My children, especially my oldest, were afraid of me when I got angry. I could not wrap my head around why I felt lost, alone, and misunderstood.

It was in the midst of these challenges that I had the opportunity to take the Dialogues of Honor and Sacrifice course. And while I hoped the focus on the Vietnam war would help me understand more about my uncle, I did not realize how it would help me as well.

The course began two weeks before JCC's 2018 fall semester with a weeklong trip that took both professors and students to Gettysburg, Arlington National Cemetery and Washington D.C. We learned the history of the sites and bonded quickly. Although we were strangers, we entrusted in one another taking turns talking and listening. Sometimes no words needed to be spoken, only the presence of a fellow combat soldier who understood.

Fall semester began with the trip still fresh in our minds and we dove straight into the history of all three wars. We studied contrasts and similarities between the three wars but to our amazement, we realized that these soldiers were not so different from us. Experiences in Vietnam, the battle and firefights in Iraq were all so similar. As veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan, we could relate to stories from a Civil War soldier. This camaraderie across decades, across conflicts, was amazing. It's a special bond most could never fathom.

Our focus shifted to poetry and literature, music and art as we read *Here Bullet*, a book of short poems. Our task was to create our own poem, intimidating at first, but became a touching and lasting experience. A liberating sense of freedom to open your heart, pour every brutal emotion onto paper so that the reader can experience your reality. When we moved on to *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien, it became everyone's favorite because every student carried something special in their combat war zone. We related to one another across different branches of the military, different theaters of war and even drastically different duties while at war. Moving towards the last two weeks of the course we entered the world of art. Each student was given a blank masquerade mask to decorate it as we saw ourselves. The introspection and self-evaluation produced every raw emotion I had ever felt, as they flooded onto my mask. The syllabus surely did not reflect therapy or liberation as a goal, but it helped me face my past with the realization that none of us are alone in the battle of normalcy. The curriculum allowed everyone to engage and challenge one another. This forced everyone to try different perspectives and think differently than they normally may.

During the last week of the course, we had the privilege of speaking with two Vietnam Veterans. My initial drive for pursuing this program was upon me, trying to understand my uncle, hoping to learn how to bond with him. I learned horrific details from these Vietnam Veterans but ones I wanted to hear; ones I knew would help me relate to my uncle. But I also began to realize that searching for a better understanding about my uncle was not as impossible as I had originally thought. Our lives and experiences paralleled each other at times and occasionally even mirrored one another. My experiences were less gruesome and less drastic, but in the end, he and I carry the same demon from war, we are kept awake at night for the same reasons.

Through a combination of the course and therapy, my night terrors have lessened dramatically, anxiety attacks are almost gone, I still avoid big crowds, but I have learned to work through my fears. My relationships with my family both immediate and extended have improved and is no longer strained. For the first time in my life, I have been at peace with myself and no longer self-medicate to drown out the noises in my head.

I am so grateful for the opportunity I had to take this course and appreciate the support this sub-committee has offered the NEH in recent years, making programs like this one possible. To ensure that more veterans and all Americans can benefit from humanities as I did, I ask that you fund the NEH at \$170 million for Fiscal Year FY 2021.

Thank you for your time.