

**NJS Presents****Teaching NJ History****In this Issue:*****The New Jersey Vietnam Veterans' Memorial and Vietnam Era Museum*****By Keri A. Giannotti****DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14713/njs.v8i1.270>**

*This article explores the New Jersey Vietnam Veterans' Memorial and Vietnam Era Museum in Holmdel, New Jersey, with a focus on field trips and classroom and continuing education resources available for educators in the state and beyond.*

**Introduction**

The New Jersey Vietnam Veterans' Memorial Foundation (NJVVMF) is committed to sharing the experiences of the Vietnam War Era and its enduring legacy with future generations. The Foundation oversees the New Jersey Vietnam Veterans' Memorial and the Vietnam Era Museum. The Memorial recognizes the valor of New Jersey's veterans specifically, and the sacrifices of their families and communities. The Museum, however, is not singularly focused on the state of New Jersey. It teaches the entirety of the Vietnam War Era through inclusive and objective exhibitions. The Memorial and Museum are conveniently located off of exit 116 on the Garden State Parkway in central New Jersey. There is ample parking for cars and buses.

**The Memorial**

The New Jersey Vietnam Veterans' Memorial honors all those from the state who served during the Vietnam War, especially the 1,562 New Jersey men and one woman who never returned home. Their names are listed individually by date of casualty on the Memorial.

The dedication of the national Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC, in 1982 inspired a group of New Jersey veterans in attendance to do something similar in their state. This grassroots effort took a giant leap forward when, on January 12, 1986, Governor Thomas Kean signed a bill creating the 14-member New Jersey Vietnam Veterans' Memorial Commission within the Department of State. The commission's charge was threefold: select an appropriate site, choose a meaningful design, and raise funds for construction.

The commission selected a 5.5-acre site in Holmdel Township, Monmouth County, drawn to the area's serene and tranquil rolling hills. The site, shared today with the PNC Bank Arts Center, has direct access to the Garden State Parkway. The next step was to choose a design for the Memorial. A statewide design competition ran through the summer of 1988 and drew 421 entries. The winning design was submitted by Hien Nguyen, a naturalized American citizen who had left Vietnam thirteen years earlier.

Nguyen designed a 200-foot diameter, open-air pavilion. Lined with 366 black granite panels on which the names of those from New Jersey who died or remain missing in action are engraved, the panels form a circle meant to enfold visitors in an embrace. The highly polished granite wall reflects the visitor, creating a powerful union between past and present. The Memorial is accessed via tunnels,



**Memorial Wall. Courtesy Jillian Decker.**

symbolizing the transition from the safety and security of the civilian world to the very different realities of war. The trees lining the walkways to the entrance evoke images of soldiers on tactical

patrol throughout the dangerous countryside. The red oak, New Jersey's state tree, is at the pavilion's center. The Memorial was officially opened following its dedication on May 7, 1995.

The campus is also home to several smaller but no less moving monuments, such as the War Dogs Memorial, Purple Heart Memorial, New Jersey Gold Star Family Monument, and Vietnamese American Monument.

### The Museum

In 1993, the Foundation expanded its mission to focus on educating the public about this complex historical era, hiring Ralph Appelbaum and Associates - renowned for designing the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. On September 27, 1998, Governor Christine Todd Whitman and famed former prisoner of war Senator John McCain joined a large crowd to dedicate the Vietnam Era Museum.

The Museum features a chronology of the Era, shown in two concurrent timelines — one reflecting the activity in Vietnam and the other reflecting political, cultural, and historical events in the United States. This allows visitors to gain a fuller perspective of the political, military, social, and cultural elements in play during this time.



**Top: Museum interior showcasing the “Circle of Letters,” a collection of military medals, and the timeline highlighting concurrent events in Vietnam and back in the United States.**

**Bottom: Child looking at a booklet of photographs accompanying the timeline mural in the Vietnam Era Museum.**

**Courtesy NJVVMF/Ira Fox.**

Interspersed along this timeline are touch screen kiosks that provide visitors with an interactive glance at historical events.

Complementing the historical timeline are artifacts, photographs, and letters that share the personal experiences of those who served and their supporters back home, humanizing the War and its lasting effects on peoples' lives. At the museum's center is the Testimony Theater, where those who lived this history share their experiences. Temporary exhibits are featured in the theater area and lobby of the Museum. These change two to three times each year and focus on various topics related to the Vietnam Era.

### **Making a Visit**

The New Jersey Vietnam Veterans' Memorial and all outdoor monuments are open to the public, at no cost, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. As noted above, there is ample parking for cars and buses. Visitors are encouraged to visit NJVVMF's website ([www.njvvmf.org](http://www.njvvmf.org)) in advance of their trip; Facebook and Twitter pages are also regularly updated with virtual content and updates on activities. The Museum is generally open Tuesday-Saturday, 10 AM-4 PM. Admission costs \$7.00 for adults and \$5.00 for students and seniors. Veterans, active-duty personnel, and children under 12 are free. (For more on class trips specifically, please continue reading.)

### **Professional Development for Educators**

The landmark professional development program offered by the NJVVMF is the Annual Interdisciplinary Forum, which seeks to prepare educators to infuse the diverse and complicated narratives of the Vietnam War Era into the classroom setting across subject matters. This event usually attracts over seventy-five middle school and high school teachers from across the tri-state area. Professional development credit is provided.

The forum's annual theme and keynote focus on timely and historically relevant topics. In 2018, for example, the forum focused on the 50th anniversary of the 1968 Tet Offensive. The keynote was Paul W. Bucha, a Medal of Honor Recipient during Vietnam. This tied to an exciting temporary exhibit by then Curator Greg Waters, "Above and Beyond: The History of the Medal of Honor."

The 2019 forum welcomed Mary Beth Tinker, the famous student from the 1969 Supreme Court free speech case *Tinker v. Des Moines*. Teachers heard firsthand from Mary Beth as she discussed the activism she and other students displayed by wearing black armbands to protest the Vietnam War.

March 2020 would have seen the 20th Annual Interdisciplinary Forum to be hosted on-site. 2020 was the 50th anniversary of Kent State Shootings, and, as such, the 2020 keynote was supposed to be John Filo. John is currently a Vice President at CBS Media and an Adjunct Journalism Professor at the College of New Jersey. However, on May 4, 1970, he was on the Kent State campus. He caught the iconic and unforgettable photo of Mary Ann Vecchio kneeling over the body of Jeffrey Miller. John went on to win the Pulitzer Prize for that image. Unfortunately, this event was canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Partnerships are also key to the forum's success. There is an annual slot reserved for Callie Wright, the Washington, DC Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund Director of Education. In one of her presentations, she mentioned the stories behind things that have been left at the Vietnam Veterans Wall in Washington, DC. In one moving example, she discussed a box of cookies that were left at the wall with a note that read, "*Mom and Dad want you to have these cookies and Kool-Aid. . . . They send all their love.*" The box and the note were returned home when the soldier was killed in action. We have also heard from Hank Bitten, Executive Director of the New Jersey

Council for Social Studies. In 2019, he recounted how the Tet Offensive occurred during his first year teaching. He provided the perspective of a first-year teacher trying to balance history and current events in the classroom. We also make sure to include our Vietnam veteran volunteers in a panel each year, to share with their own experiences with educators. For instance, in 2019, our veterans hosted a panel, “Vets on Video,” which provided insight on the Vietnam veterans’ view of movies about the era.

We look forward to re-starting the forum as soon as circumstances allow.

### **Honoring Educators**

Since 2018, the Foundation has honored a NJVVMF Teacher of the Year. These outstanding teachers from the state of New Jersey have demonstrated a long-term commitment to the teaching of this complex history and have partnered with us on field trips, school programs, and other educational opportunities. Our first honoree in 2018 was Frank Dunn. Frank is a retired high school history teacher from Boonton High School. Frank for many years taught a semester-long course on the Vietnam War from a Vietnam Era veteran’s perspective. Others recent winners include 2019 honoree Robert Gangi, from East Brunswick High School. He presented at the forum that year on strategies to bring the Tet Offensive into the classroom. Rebecca DiBrenzia was the 2020 honoree for her collaboration on our exhibit “Soundtrack of a Changing Nation: Music of the Vietnam Era.” In addition to working on the exhibit, she produced lesson plans to bring the subject matter into classrooms. And James Fagen from Manasquan High School was our 2021 Teacher of the Year. Jim was honored at our First Annual “Spirit of Service” event on the Battleship New Jersey, for submitting student videos for our Virtual Memorial Day Ceremony and hosting an Annual Vietnam Veterans Oral History Day each year.

We will soon be announcing the 2022 NJVVMF Teacher of the Year. The honor is open to all educators in New Jersey and selected by a committee chaired by our Museum Educator Keri A. Giannotti. Should you have a candidate in mind, send her an email at [kgiannotti@njvvmf.org](mailto:kgiannotti@njvvmf.org).

### **Classroom Resources**

Lastly, providing resources for use inside and out of the classroom is essential to the work we do at the NJVVMF. Our field trip program is a huge part of this. We have school districts who annually send their students to tour the Memorial and Museum and hear history from the people who lived it. Our on-site tours are twofold. There is a tour of The New Jersey Vietnam Veterans' Memorial and all the surrounding monuments and memorials on the property, led by Vietnam veteran tour guides. They discuss the symbolism behind the monuments and memorials, and share their own experiences during the Vietnam War. Our volunteers make a point of explaining to

students that the in-country experience depended on various factors such as where you were in the country, the time you served, and your branch and your military occupational specialty. We have over thirty tour guides, and, just as no two tours of duty were alike, no two tours of our campus are alike.



**Vietnam Era Museum flanked by two-tour Bell UH-1 Iroquois, the “Huey.” Courtesy NJVVMF.**



The second part of the class visit includes a tour of the Vietnam Era Museum. As noted above, New Jersey is home to the first and only museum devoted to the Vietnam Era. Our iconic timeline is a fantastic tool for teaching to juxtapose the period's social and cultural themes with war. Another student favorite is the circle of letters and the diorama of a base camp in Vietnam.

School tours run Monday to Friday. We strongly encourage teachers to book as early as possible as we are typically fully booked for the Spring months. For more information, pricing, and our contract, visit our website at [www.njvvmf.org](http://www.njvvmf.org) or contact our Tour Manager Michelle Knell at [mknell@njvvmf.org](mailto:mknell@njvvmf.org).

When the pandemic struck, tours stopped; but we were able to bring our stories and the memorial to the school via Virtual Vet Visits, where our tour guides meet with classes around the state virtually. We plan to continue this indefinitely. Again, information on this can be found on our website or by contacting our Museum Educator, Keri, at [kgiannotti@bloomfield.k12.nj.us](mailto:kgiannotti@bloomfield.k12.nj.us).

We are currently preparing to launch an Educators Portal, which will be a clearinghouse for lessons plans, video resources, guest speakers, and more. Stay tuned for more information.

We hope to see you and your students soon!

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