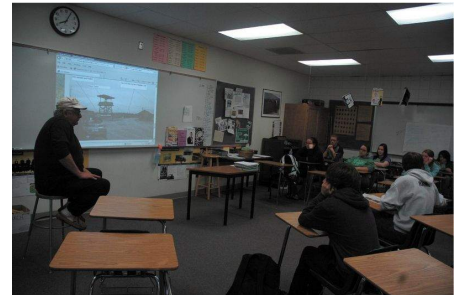


Vietnam vet tells teens of war

By Denise Ruttan

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Phil Richards of Stayton speaks to students in Stayton High School teacher Alan Kirby's history class about his experience in the Vietnam War.

It's the first period of the day, so the Stayton High School students in teacher Alan Kirby's AP U.S. History elective class on the 1960s are sleepy — but they're listening.

These juniors and seniors have been studying the Vietnam War for six weeks out of textbooks and projects. Now they're getting some living history.

Phil Richards of Stayton stands in front of a projector screen that flashes fuzzy pictures of the country where he spent 13 months of his life, the country that has changed so much that he does not recognize it anymore, the country that he does not want to ever visit again.

"My daughter Courtney volunteered me three years ago to talk to her history class. I have nothing prepared. I come here to elicit a few questions and give a brief rundown of my experience," Richards says.

He grew up on a chicken farm in a small town in Southern California. Richards was drafted into the Army and shipped out to Vietnam in 1968.

"Quite frankly, I don't know how to relate to you something that is real history for you, something that happened before you were born," Richards says. "For me the Civil War or World War II is history and that's hard for me to relate to, the same as it's hard for you to relate to Vietnam."

But later, when Richards asks how many students have family ties to the military, several raise their hands.

Kiely Stubenrauch comes from a military family.

"It meant a lot," Stubenrauch said of Richards' talk. "It helped me understand more about the war, what my uncles and what everyone goes through. We don't talk about it much, but we let everyone know that we appreciate what they're doing."

Richards is the first to tell people how he feels about war. How senseless they can get; how political they can become. But when Richards sees soldiers at the grocery store in camos fresh from Iraq or veterans at the coffee shop, he tells them, "Thank you" and "Welcome home."

Nobody said anything like that during the Vietnam years.

"I was the same age as a lot of you. Think about someone plucking you out of a war zone and telling you to get on with your life 24 hours later," Richards tells the class. "When I got off the plane in San Francisco, people were spitting on me, calling me a baby killer, because I was in uniform. Starting when you get home, you shut it away somewhere."

For more than 35 years, Phil Richards could not talk about the war — not to his family, not to anyone. He had two failed marriages.

When Richards saw people throw away food they didn't touch, he got blindingly angry at the wastefulness. When he smelled rotting garbage, memories emerged of the hot, sticky jungle, the smells and the heat, where nothing was what it seemed. But Richards could not explain those visceral reactions. He had buried Vietnam in a part of his psyche where no one could touch it, not even himself.

Richards worked hard during those 35 years. He was protective of his family. He tried to be a good father. But he was a ticking time bomb, always watchful for landmines.

His ex-wives wondered which Phil Richards they would see that day — the man they fell in love with or the other man, the man who was angry at the world.

Richards' brother is a former Marine who also was in Vietnam. They couldn't be more different.

"All he would do was talk about it, and I would tell him to shut up. I didn't want to think about it," Richards said. "He was bugging me for years to talk to the VA."

Richards called his local Veterans' Affairs office around 2002. The first thing a staffer told him on the phone was "welcome home."

Tears suddenly streaked down Phil Richards' face.

"Those were powerful words. Most of those guys had no home to go to," Richards said. "They came home to a country that didn't like them, to a country that spat on you and treated you like crap."

Richards went through group counseling. He filed a claim for disabled veteran benefits. He started to talk about it.

Richards has been married to Kimberley, who went through it all with him, for 18 years. They moved to Stayton in 2005 to be closer to Richards' daughter, Courtney. He is a stepfather to four children.

When Phil Richards started talking to high school students about the war, it was a kind of catharsis.

Life is not a dream anymore. When he is at home in Stayton with his family and his dogs, he feels a kind of peace and quiet. But the war is still there. It will always be there.

"I feel like I stopped growing at 19. I've learned a lot of things. I'm still 19," Richards said. "I don't think I ever grew beyond that. My life was taken away."

When Phil Richards talks to veterans, they don't talk about the nights their hands tightened around a rifle in their sleep; those afternoons when their buddies died; how odd it is that there are correct and incorrect ways of killing people in war; how they struggle to form real connections because in Vietnam, when you got close to someone they got shot.

Instead, they talk about the small moments in between. The beautiful beaches where they surfed and played football during the day. The heat, the smells, the jungle. The entertainment at night.

And they tell each other, "Thank you." They tell each other, "Welcome home." They ask each other if they've talked with the VA yet.

And they try to live another day.

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