

Article originally published in *Educators' Spotlight Digest*: Volume 1, Issue 2 (Spring/Summer 2006)

Students As Active Historians

by MariRae Dopke-Wilson

Coming up with interesting information literacy lessons can be challenging for the high school librarian. If we have taught our upper class students well, most are prepared to navigate their way successfully through libraries and Internet resources. So where do you find an exciting and memorable media project for Junior and Senior students? Tom Bohdan, Library Director for Naperville Central High School in Illinois,



has just the solution.



Three years ago Bohdan introduced faculty and students to the VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT, a collection of personal wartime stories from veterans who served our country from WWI through current conflicts. Created by our United States Congress in 2000 as part of the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress, the project gives students the unique opportunity to record history by interviewing veterans and preserving their legacy for perpetuity.

With 31 years experience as a school librarian, Bohdan says his experiences with the project are truly the most memorable of his career. *"This activity energizes students and teachers alike. It's real world. They are making a difference. They became 'historians' in every sense of the word and touch the lives of future generations. If you set the bar high and make the proper provisions for them they will far exceed your expectations."*

'Veterans History Project' Mission

The Library of Congress cites schools like Naperville Central High (NCH) as important partners who have contributed significantly to the mission of the VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT, by collecting personal recollections of wartime veterans to honor their service and share their stories with current and future generations. Project contributions include veteran memoirs, photographs, letters and diaries, in addition to oral interviews, as Naperville has contributed, recorded on audio and videotape. Tom Bohdan was motivated to gain support on the project from Naperville faculty after hearing a surprising statistic. *"They are losing about a thousand WWII veterans a day. Their stories are priceless, many stories have never been recorded, many stories have never been mentioned to their sons and daughters."* It took little convincing for faculty to give the go-ahead for participation. In fact, Bohdan believes it was the synergy that was created by working as a team that led to the success of the project. He consulted the VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT web site at www.loc.gov/vets, for guidelines and registration. Next, the start-up work included locating equipment and tape stock, contacting veterans, scheduling interviews and even transportation when necessary. He and his colleagues at NCH shared the load and it was this *partnering* of efforts that made it all possible. For example, the social

studies teacher made sure that students had knowledge about different wars so they could develop appropriate questioning for specific veterans. *"Next the students had to understand their role. We discussed interviewing techniques, being a primary source or historian collecting the information, and the ingredient of sharing this information with the Library of Congress. Everything you do in this project has a life beyond this classroom, recording audio, recording video. They are creating knowledge; they are creating something that has never been seen before. So it was something to watch these students craft their questions. There was an excitement that I watched. There was a sense of honor and privilege to be a part of it. They became the historians."*



Students Connect with Veterans

"Eye opening and memorable" are words Naperville students use to describe their work on documenting veterans' experiences. Their comments regarding the project clearly show that this lesson's teachings went beyond library media skills. Student Tom Carroll found the living history lesson to give him a more vivid picture of war unlike anything he had learned before from books. *"You can read about it and you can try to understand, but when you actually get a first hand account of what people went through and what their experiences were you really start to understand what it was all about. And I think by not getting that, you can understand the war but you can't really comprehend it. That's what the great thing about this veteran's project is."*

Naperville student, Catherine Thomas, believes the project is the most unique thing she's experienced in high school. *"I wouldn't have given up this opportunity for anything. Interviewing the veterans has really opened my eyes to what they've gone through and what they continue to go through. For anyone who is considering doing this, I'd highly suggest it because it's been a unique experience for me and my classmates. And I really think that by interviewing the veterans we got to know their stories and it's an experience better than any textbook can ever teach me."*



Erin Fitzsimmons encourages other high school students to get involved. *"They have fought for our country; they've done so much for us and they normally are forgotten. Through this you get to see what their experiences were like and also there will be many of you students who will have to go to war and experience the same thing, so it's good to remember our veterans."*

A Meaningful Lesson

If you are ready for an exciting and memorable project that reaps big rewards, consider the VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT. Like any meaningful lesson it requires

pre-planning, collaboration and cooperation, but Library Director Tom Bohdan believes it's well worth the effort. *"As I think about the Veterans History Project, there are going to be those that may question the logistics and wonder if this too labor intensive or whether we have enough time in the curriculum. And I would say yes, there is indeed time to spend half a day giving these students a chance for a field trip that they, in a sense, will never forget. Veterans can come here; students can also interview those particular veterans as we did when we traveled to see them. At the end, what I saw was not only the students thanking the veterans for the time that they had been given, but I saw veterans of our nations' wars looking very heartfelt into the eyes of these students and saying 'thank you,' thank you for hearing my story." One of the things that strikes me is the passion that was created in the students as they work with this particular project. And not just in reading from the books and trying to make those connections with a veteran, but actually spending some time with the particular project and seeing a real connection in the eyes of the veteran. It was something to watch as if akin to a grandparent and a grandchild, or a favorite aunt or a favorite uncle.*

Guidelines for Participation

Complete information on Veterans History Project participation, especially for students, is available online at www.loc.gov/vets, by clicking on "Participate in the Project." Coming up in June, look for the video 'Students as Active Historians,' in the S.O.S. for Information Literacy database.

Special thanks to Naperville Central High School Library Director, Tom Bohdan for coordinating interviews with Naperville students for this article.

MARIRAE DOPKE is the Feature Story Writer and Video Producer for the S.O.S. for Information Literacy project.