

Bridging the Generational Gap: From Veterans to Youth

It began with a 4-H flag etiquette speech when I was eight years old. Three years later, as I witnessed fire consume an American flag during a flag retirement ceremony, I sensed patriotism. After I spoke about our flag, a Veteran approached me with tears in his eyes. He kissed me on the forehead, said “Thank you,” and walked away. That day, I realized I can make a difference. Patriotism and servant leadership have become part of me. I cannot separate the two. Nine years devoted to volunteering for Veterans has granted me the core values of gratitude and humility while teaching me lessons one may never learn from a textbook. The heroism of American Veterans epitomizes “Service above Self” and reflects their love for our country and devotion to ensuring our freedom, which is not granted in perpetuity. It must be fought for, protected, and passed on to future generations.

This documentary was a vision that became fruition. I aspired to tell the story illustrating the generational gap between youth and veterans, particularly Vietnam veterans, while fostering a greater understanding of patriotism and the importance of understanding that freedom is not free. Through this piece, it is my goal to inspire and motivate American citizens to have an increased sense of gratitude towards veterans for their service and sacrifice that has ensured that our nation remains the greatest in the world.

Last year, when my principal denied my request to host a Veterans Day assembly, I chose to dissent. I explained Veterans do not ask to be recognized, yet it is the duty and responsibility of public schools to prepare and equip students to become well informed citizens and the leaders of tomorrow. He changed his mind, and the assembly was a tremendous success. I learned to persevere with tenacity, optimism, and vision knowing setbacks are not a final destination, but instead a portal to the future. This year’s assembly occurred with no opposition. It was an opportunity to mentor, inspire, and educate others. I assumed full responsibility, organized committees, and executed an event that educated students and honored heroes. It can be challenging to persuade potential volunteers to step out of their comfort zone which means finding creative ways to encourage participation. The assembly was an outlet to bring out the best in others as volunteers were able to serve, perform, lead, learn and grow. It would not have been successful without them. Mobilizing and directing others to transform vision into fruition illustrates effective leadership can be determined by the leaders they create. At the beginning of the ceremony, my documentary played. It was an incredible experience to see the hours of directing, planning, interviewing, editing, and producing become a reality, a story being told to my peers, teachers, and veterans from the community. Inspiring others to join together to produce a positive outcome came full circle when a school custodian came to me after the assembly and confessed he was a Veteran who had never been thanked for his service. Gratitude and humility exuded from his servant heart as I looked into the eyes of a hero who fought for his country and had never been thanked, yet continues to serve others as a school custodian. We must seek out the best in others because heroes are among us every day.

In this film, I chose to interview two veterans who hold a very special place in my heart. Mr. Steve Gray is someone I met through the Veterans History Project, and Mr. Derl Horn is a volunteer at the Veterans Healthcare System of the Ozarks. Their words, experiences, and stories are a genuine inspiration. Both of them are the epitome of “Service above self” and have led lives that demonstrate the importance of being a part of something far greater than self. Mr. Derl has taught me to “Build bridges of friendship between generations by expressing kindness, encouragement and respect as we humbly listen and value different opinions.” Katie Gardner and Amani Wilson have devoted hundreds of hours to engaging with veterans to convey their appreciation for freedom. Katie was the 2017 National VA Youth Volunteer of the Year, and it was my desire to convey the passion of her and Amani in this documentary to demonstrate two exemplary youth who recognize the importance of engaging with veterans.

This documentary is only the beginning. I hope to continue preserving and telling the stories of American veterans through the Library of Congress Veterans History Project. I am committed to doing my part to ensure we live in a world that unites us to be the good our founding fathers intended, the principles our Veterans have fought for, and the forthcoming that will become our legacy. The efforts and contributions of my generation are capable of overcoming the division in this great country while ensuring it continues to prevail as the greatest and most magnificent nation in the world.