



BROOKLYN  
HISTORICAL  
SOCIETY

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**IN OUR OWN WORDS: PORTRAITS OF BROOKLYN'S VIETNAM VETERANS**

**BROOKLYN HISTORICAL SOCIETY INAUGURATES INNOVATIVE  
ORAL HISTORY GALLERY**

**December 14, 2007, Brooklyn, NY, --** The combination of striking life-sized photographic portraits and audio clips that vividly recount the memories and experiences of nine local veterans who served in the Vietnam War is the basis of the new exhibition at the Brooklyn Historical Society (BHS), opening on December 14, entitled: *In Our Own Words: Portraits Of Brooklyn's Vietnam Veterans*. Through the use of innovative technology, visitors to the new Oral History Gallery will hear personal stories recounted by the veterans, who are represented in the exhibition by their photographic portraits. Artifacts, including diaries, letters and personal effects belonging to the featured veterans, will also be on display. In addition, a computer kiosk will provide further stories of the nine veterans, as well as the stories of other Brooklyn-based veterans.

*In Our Own Words* is the collaborative effort of Philip Napoli, a Professor of History at Brooklyn College (CUNY), Kate Fermoile, Vice President for Exhibits and Education at BHS, and Alison Cornyn, Founding Partner and Director of Picture Projects. The exhibition marks the culmination of several years of work for Napoli, who conducted over 100 oral histories of Brooklyn's Vietnam veterans, assisted by Sady Sullivan, Oral History Manager at BHS. Together, the curators built this exhibition around the stories of veterans whose stories were compelling, diverse, yet representative, and whose voices best conveyed the emotions and experiences of an era and a community.

"The oral history gallery is a wonderful addition to BHS, as it gives us the opportunity to collect and share stories that have both historic significance and are relevant to the world today," said Kate Fermoile. "Hearing the personal stories in the teller's own voice, while standing in front of their life-sized image is tremendously compelling." The storytellers will touch on themes including growing up in Brooklyn, going off to war, vivid descriptions of combat, returning home, the long term impact of their war experiences, and their lives today. *In Our Own Words* will be on display for one full year, after which a new oral history exhibition will take its place.

As part of his job at Brooklyn College, Philip Napoli began collecting oral histories of Brooklyn's Vietnam veterans in 2001. At present, he has collected many thousands of pages of transcribed material. Throughout the process, Napoli forged deep connections with those he interviewed. "You'd be amazed to hear how many veterans say they never speak of their wartime lives with their families, or that I am the first one to ever want to talk about Vietnam with them," Napoli explained. "One of the primary purposes behind this exhibition and my work in general is simple," he continued. "We will soon be facing a brand new generation of soldiers, both men and women, returning home from war with

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many of the same kinds of problems the Vietnam generation has struggled with. There are differences between the two wars but the psychological toll for each individual soldier has most likely not changed a great deal.”

Each of the nine photographic portraits featured in the exhibition was printed on canvas and framed in a fashion reminiscent of the other historically significant artworks in the Historical Society collection. As a visitor approaches each portrait, their motion triggers the accompanying 3-5 minute audio clip, played through Hypersonic Sound Speakers mounted on the ceiling above. From that position, it sounds as if the speaker is standing right next to the listener, while in other parts of the room, the voice sounds like a whisper.

In addition to the featured oral histories, the exhibition continues on the second floor with an installation of work by local photographers Bernie Edelman, Leroy Henderson and Tony Velez. There is also a reading room with selected books and articles about the Vietnam War, and on the first floor, a Bulletin Board where visitors are encouraged to leave their responses to the exhibition, as well as photographs or other artifacts from their own experiences of the Vietnam War.

Throughout the run of the exhibition, BHS will host days during which a team of oral history interviewers will be available to record the oral histories and memories of veterans (not exclusive to the war in Vietnam) for the BHS archives. Public programs including films, panel discussions on the nature of memory, and other topics will be held. Please refer to the BHS web site for more information.

*In Our Own Words: Portraits Of Brooklyn’s Vietnam Veterans*, has been funded by a generous grant from the Nathan Cummings Foundation. Additional support has been provided by HBO, and American Technology Corporation. General operating support is made possible with public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs and the New York State Council on the Arts, a State agency.

**In Our Own Words: Portraits Of Brooklyn’s Vietnam Veterans** will be on display through December of 2008. For information on this and other exhibits, visit [www.brooklynhistory.org](http://www.brooklynhistory.org) or call 718-222-4111. Brooklyn Historical Society is located at 128 Pierrepont Street.

The nine Brooklyn Veterans featured in *In Our Own Words* include:

- **John and Denis Hamill** – The brothers of journalist Pete Hamill grew up in the “Irish Ghetto” of Park Slope. John enlisted as a medic in the 173<sup>rd</sup> Airborne Brigade in 1967. Despite being against the war, John wanted to witness what he believed would be his county’s “defining moment.” Although brother Denis was too young to enlist, he experienced the potent effects of the war on his country and his city. After both brothers graduated from Staten Island Community College, John began his career in journalism at the Village Voice. He is presently the Director of Communications at Brooklyn College. Denis went on to become a journalist, writing for numerous publications including the New York Daily News, where he is currently a columnist. He is also the author of over ten novels.
- **Joan Furey** – A Brooklyn native, Ms. Furey joined the Army Nurse Corps as a Second Lieutenant in 1968. After serving four months stateside she volunteered for Vietnam and was assigned to the 71<sup>st</sup> evacuation hospital in Pleiku, Vietnam where she served from January 1969 - January 1970, earning a bronze star. Since 1975, she has worked for the Department of Veteran’s Affairs. In 1992 she founded the first PTSD inpatient treatment program for women war veterans at the VA in Menlo Park, CA. Ms. Furey currently lives in Sayville, LI where she remains active in veterans’ activities.
- **Anthony Wallace** – Mr. Wallace grew up in the Marcy projects between Williamsburg and Bedford Stuyvesant. After attending Kingsburg Community College, he accepted a position as a typist for ConEd. He entered the military in 1969 after which he elected to enter noncommissioned officers school. In 1970, Wallace went to Vietnam where he was hurt in an attack that left twenty-five US wounded and seven dead. Upon his return home, he earned his BA from Brooklyn College. He continues to work for ConEd.

- **Ed German** – A member of one of the first African American families to live on Willoughby Street, Ed German left high school in November of 1967, to join the Marines. In August of 1968, he was sent to Vietnam where he joined Bravo Company, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion. Two weeks later, he was transferred to the 4<sup>th</sup> Marines in Quang Tri Province. Mr. German experienced several episodes of intense combat and was wounded in May of 1969. Today, Ed is a jazz radio personality in Long Island and an accomplished painter.
- **Rudy Thomas** – At age 16, Rudy Thomas came to the United States from his home in Trinidad. He was drafted into the army five years later, in 1965, and trained in Fort Dix, Fort Gordon and Fort Bragg. He volunteered for airborne and later became a drill instructor at Fort Bragg. Mr. Thomas was first injured while serving with the 173<sup>rd</sup> Airborne Brigade when a mine went off and blasted shrapnel through his ankle. His last injury occurred when another mine exploded as he led his squad down a hill. Rudy was evacuated to the Naval Hospital in Queens, where he remained for a year until he could walk again.
- **Neil Joseph Kenny** –Mr. Kenny joined the Marine Corps in June of 1967 and arrived at the Khe Sanh Combat Base in Vietnam in January of 1968. There he served as an 0331 Machine Gunner with Lima Company, 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, throughout the entire siege of Khe Sanh during the Tet Offensive of 1968. For his service, Neil received the Purple Heart as well as the Navy Commendation Medal for Valorous Service. After returning stateside, he completed his GED, attended Staten Island Community College, became a State Trooper and ultimately became a high school teacher at Fort Hamilton High School, the same school he had dropped out of nearly 20 years before.
- **Ed Blanco** – At the age of 19, Ed Blanco volunteered for the draft and attended Jump School in Fort Jackson, Carolina. He arrived in Vietnam in October of 1967 and was stationed in Cam Ranh Bay with the Eleven Bravo, Infantry when the company saw their first action and suffered their first casualties. His company successfully defended “Firebase Betty” from several days of Vietcong assault. In March of 1969, Mr. Blanco was wounded by a grenade but reported back to duty 40 days later. He remains very active in veterans’ affairs.
- **Herbert Sweat** – Coming from a strong military background, after graduating from Franklin K. Lane High School, Mr. Sweat followed in his father’s footsteps and joined the service. In the fall of 1967, he was sent with the 173<sup>rd</sup> Airborne Brigade to Bien Hoa and was placed in A-Company, General Westmoreland’s strike unit. Herbert estimates that he participated in 75-80 combat air assaults and was part of one of the bloodiest battles in Vietnam, Hill 875 in Dak To. He has dedicated his life to helping American veterans as a member of the Board of Directors of Brooklyn’s Black Veterans for Social Justice.
- **Joseph Giannini** – While attending Hofstra University on a wrestling scholarship, Joseph received his draft notice. He enlisted in the Marines, due in large part he says, to John Wayne and Audie Murphy movies. After basic training at Parris Island, Mr. Giannini volunteered for Vietnam and was sent as an infantryman in 1967, where he commanded a rifle platoon as part of the Special Landing Force. Joseph defended the Quaison Valley in August of 1967, where he lost half his platoon. Mr. Giannini has been practicing criminal law for over 30 years and hosts a television show called “East Side Veterans.”

*Founded in 1863, Brooklyn Historical Society (BHS) is a museum, library and educational center dedicated to connecting the past to the present and making the vibrant history of Brooklyn tangible, relevant and meaningful for today’s diverse communities and visitors, and for generations to come. BHS hosts over 9,000 members of the general public at its exhibitions each year and over 70,000 public school students and teachers annually by providing exhibition tours, educational programs and curricula, and by making its professional staff available for instruction and consultation. BHS is open Wednesday through Sunday, 12 noon to 5:00 p.m. Admission is \$6 for adults, \$4 for seniors and children. Children under the age of 12 are free.*

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