

# War Remembered: In Their Own Words



*Brooklyn Vietnam veteran Rudy Thomas (behind lectern) presents parachute to Professor Phil Napoli and his delighted daughters, conveying honorary paratrooper status on the Brooklyn College historian. Fellow Vietnam veteran, Judge Lucian Vecchio (center, in suit), looks on.*

Documenting the wrenching personal journeys of scores of Brooklynites who went from fighting a controversial war in Vietnam to discussing their experiences thirty years later was an opportunity for Assistant Professor of History Philip Napoli to fill a serious academic void.

The resultant oral history project and upcoming book, *In Our Own Words: Portraits of Brooklyn Vietnam Veterans*, is on display through the end of 2008 at the Brooklyn Historical Society in Brooklyn Heights. Through a series of listening stations, a display of Vietnam War-era medals and artifacts, and life-sized photographs of some veterans, Napoli, photographer Alison Coryn of Picture Projects Alison, and the BHS curators have carefully culled from more than five hundred hours of recorded interviews a charged distillate of moving memory.

"As a historian, I saw this is as a rich vein of contemporary material that needed to be tapped now," Napoli says, adding that a \$50,000 gift from private sources and money from his own pocket fueled this labor-intensive, four-year effort.

"These men and women are beginning to age, and their vital stories need to be captured immediately," Napoli says, noting that resources available to complete the research are currently exhausted. While recognizing that much valuable academic work remains to be done in this area, Napoli is pleased to point out that, unsurprisingly, several of the veterans featured in the exhibit are Brooklyn College alumni.

"I have come to learn that guys like BC grads Anthony Wallace, '75, who came out of the Marcy Houses in Williamsburg, and Bernie Edelman, '68, from Canarsie, are much more typical of Vietnam veterans than the stereotype of the violent, crazed human time-bombs that far too many people are still comfortable with believing," Napoli says. Wallace is currently enjoying a successful career at Con Edison, and Edelman, a widely respected editor, author, and photographer, remains very active in veterans' affairs.

"These veterans are our brothers and sisters and fathers and uncles and bosses and friends," Napoli says. "I hope this exhibit represents them fairly, with all their warts, but also with the dignity and respect that they deserve."