

June 26, 2008

In Our Own Words

*Honors the Voices of Vietnam Veterans
In BHS' Oral History Gallery*



Brooklyn, NY, -- Striking life-sized portraits and audio clips vividly recount the memories and experiences of nine local veterans who served in the Vietnam War at the Brooklyn Historical Society (BHS) exhibition, *In Our Own Words: Portraits Of Brooklyn's Vietnam Veterans*. Through the use of innovative technology, visitors to BHS' new Oral History Gallery are able to hear first-person accounts of local veterans. The stories embody the myriad of emotions felt by each veteran: sorrow, joy, humor, remorse; and each story is a poignant and intimate glimpse into the oft-overlooked accounts of Vietnam 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 Coordinator at BHS. Together, the curators built the exhibition around the stories of veterans whose stories were compelling, diverse, representative, and whose voices best conveyed the emotions and experiences of an era and a community.

"The Vietnam exhibition is unlike anything we've ever done at BHS; it gives us the opportunity to collect and share stories that have both historic significance and are relevant to the world today. Hearing the personal stories in the teller's own voice, while standing in front of their life-sized image is tremendously compelling," said Ms. Fermoile.

The Veterans' stories touch on themes of growing up in Brooklyn, going off to war, combat, returning home, and the long term impact of their war experiences.

As part of his job at Brooklyn College, Philip Napoli began collecting oral histories of Brooklyn's Vietnam veterans in 2001.

"One of the primary purposes behind this exhibition and my work in general is simple: we will soon be facing a brand new generation of soldiers, both men and women, returning home from war with 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 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's collection. As a visitor approaches a portrait, their motion triggers the launch of the accompanying 3-5 minute audio clip, played through Hypersonic Sound Speakers mounted on the ceiling above. From that position, the audio sounds as if the storyteller 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. The exhibit will remain up until December 2008.

BHS continues to host public programs each month and Vietnam oral history interviews by appointment throughout the run of the exhibition. Recent programs included the panel discussion "The Impact of Listening and Being Heard," held on June 11 with Philip Napoli and Dr. Herbert H. Stein, Director of the PTSD Clinical Team at the Veterans Affairs Healthcare System in Brooklyn. For information on this and other exhibits, visit www.brooklynhistory.org or call 718-222-4111. Brooklyn Historical Society is located at 128 Pierrepont Street in Brooklyn Heights.

In Our Own Words is made possible by the Nathan Cummings Foundation, Astoria Federal Savings, HBO and is in partnership with Brooklyn College. Public programs are supported by Independence Community Foundation and the Booth Ferris Foundation.

The mission of the Brooklyn Historical Society is to connect the past to the present and make the vibrant history of Brooklyn tangible, relevant, and meaningful for today's diverse communities, and for generations to come. Founded in 1863, BHS functions as a library, museum and urban education center dedicated to the people of Brooklyn, providing opportunities for civic dialogue and thoughtful engagement.