

Veterans are our ‘National Treasure’

A Virginia educator, who the VFW named one of America’s top teachers this year, brings veterans into her classroom to speak

Sep 19, 2018

On the first Friday of the new school year last year, students lined the halls of Caroline Middle School in Milford, Va. They cheered as a group of local Vietnam veterans walked down the hall to their classroom, shook the vets’ hands and thanked them for their service. After the veterans took their seats, the students filed in and stood next to the students’ desks, which were labeled with the names of Virginians killed, or listed as still missing, in Vietnam.

Coffee and pastries in hand, the veterans shared their stories with the class. Army veteran Armando “Recon” Flores spoke of summers he spent stationed on Okinawa. Paul Pitts, an Air Force veteran, spoke about his time on the ground in Vietnam and of comrades lost during the war. Linda Boone shared photos from her time in the field hospitals of Vietnam as an Army nurse.

With all of the students on the edge of their seats, it was clear that hearing these Vietnam veterans speak had moved them. It was just as clear that having the opportunity to speak to the students had touched the veterans as well.

“For a lot of Vietnam veterans, we didn’t get the kind of homecoming we should have returning from the war,” Boone said. “So even all these years later, it means so much to see these kids cheering for us, to have a chance to tell our stories, maybe to teach them a thing or two.

“We did what we did because it was our duty, and we only ask what every veteran asks of their fellow Americans: that they remember us, honor our sacrifices and that they never forget us.”

It was an extraordinary morning for those Vietnam veterans and those schoolchildren. It was one of many such efforts from Sara Gibson Coan, a 2018 recipient of the Smart/Maher

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VFW National Teacher Award.

‘HISTORY ISN’T JUST IN BOOKS’

The work Coan has done to recognize veterans at Caroline Middle School is apparent as soon as visitors pull into the neighboring high school’s parking lot. In front of the school is the Korean War Memorial Garden, the first project of the middle school history club co-founded by Coan in 2013.

Coan learned from soldiers at nearby Fort A.P. Hill that the 38th parallel — which formed the border between North and South Korea prior to the Korean War and intersects the present Korean Demilitarized Zone that separates the two countries — also crosses the front lawn of Caroline High School. She and members of the history club then built the memorial garden between July 27, 2013 — the 60th anniversary of the signing of Korean War armistice — and Veterans Day that year.

“When I started teaching, the first thing I wanted to show my students was that history isn’t just in books, it’s all around us,” Coan said. “One of the first things I did was start asking if there were any local veterans who would talk to my class about their experiences.”

That earned Coan the attention of VFW Post 10295 in nearby Bowling Green, specifically member Moody Pitts. Moody, who received the Purple Heart twice for his service in Vietnam, was one of the first veterans Coan approached about speaking to her history class.

“I never much talked about Vietnam, so when Sara invited me to talk to the kids, I was a bit uneasy at first,” Moody said. “Once I got there, and started talking with these kids, it just made me feel at ease, that I could talk about it, and I started trying to get other vets in there to talk, and it just grew from there.”

The impact it had on the veterans, according to Moody, was immediate.

“Having a place to talk about Vietnam, having these kids listen, having them learn, getting a thank you, it’s like a weight off the chest,” Moody said after reflecting on his visit. “Some of these guys, you even see them walk straighter.”

According to Coan, the impact the veterans have on her students is just as apparent, from their studies to how they recite the Pledge of Allegiance.

“Even if they’re running late, they always stand up, and they’ve said the pledge louder and louder as the year has gone on,” Coan said. “It’s one thing to read about it in a book, [but] to hear history from the men and women who lived it, the impact on these kids can’t be measured.”

‘REALLY MAKES HISTORY COME ALIVE’

It was through Moody, that his brother James Pitts, commander of VFW Post 8529 in Sandston, Va., got involved with Coan's classroom. He was immediately impressed with the program.

"I'd never seen a teacher like her," James said. "The way she runs things, she just draws the kids in, makes sure they actually learn it, not just read about it. She has displays, she brings in speakers like us, she really makes history come alive in her classroom."

When the time came for Post 8529 to look for someone to nominate for VFW's annual Teacher of the Year contest, James knew the Post had its nominee in Coan. Though he had never nominated a teacher before, James described the process as straightforward.

"We had to have a committee here to review the applications, and then the ones that we nominated and voted on we sent up to the District level," James said.

He explained that Coan won the award for Virginia's District 3 and eventually earned the award at the state — or Department — level, too.

Coan received the awards in quick succession. She won the Post and District awards in November and the Department award in December.

Then, in January of this year, James called to tell her that she had won the national award, and Coan finally allowed herself to celebrate. It also gave her the chance to express her gratitude that she had touched the veterans whose stories had such an impact on her students.

"Our veterans are our national treasures, I truly believe that," Coan said. "That I can do something for them and for my students at the same time, you know what I call that? A really good day at the office."

Coan received \$1,000 at this year's VFW national convention for professional development purposes, while Caroline Middle School received another \$1,000. Coan said she wants to use a portion of that for arranging a field trip to the Vietnam War Foundation and Museum in Ruckersville, Va. Both Moody and James Pitts hope to join her.

"What she has done in her classroom, it's remarkable, it's commendable, and I hope it's imitated," James said. "That you can heal some of these veterans, teach these kids, have the impact on your community that Sarah has, she's the model of what a great teacher should be."

This article is featured in the August 2018 issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by

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