

Film tells story of returning Vietnam veterans

Mike Sand said it took him about 10 years to "adjust to being a veteran."

Part of that had to do with the fact that Vietnam War vets could not join some of the oldest veterans service organizations. It took a while to change membership requirements that allowed Vietnam veterans in, and the U.S. was trying to heal from the turmoil of the times.



Linda May

Vietnam Veterans of America started up exclusively for vets of

their era. Hard feelings mellowed for many. Vietnam vets are members, from the rank-and-file to the line officers, in multiple VSOs. Attitudes against the Vietnam War, and blaming service members for political decisions, took longer to change.

"I had long hair like most guys back then," Sand said. "For our own safety, we were told to take off our uniforms right away and not look like we had been in the military. Today, we welcome vets home — as we should." Sand, a Fraser resident, is a life member of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, and active with VVA Chapter 9 in Detroit.

He will attend the premiere of producer Keith Famie's "Our Vietnam Generation" on Jan. 28 at the Fox Theatre. It tells "his" story through those of his contemporaries.

There is a VIP private event from 6-7:30 p.m. Tickets are \$160 for a strolling dinner and cash bar on the mezzanine level, front-row seating for the film debut, Whips Tour '69-'70 (a display of historical Vietnam weapons and memorabilia), a display of production photos from the year's filming, and a photo display of the era from Leni Sinclair.

Checks for the VIP event should be made payable to the nonprofit Veterans Memorial Park of Detroit and mailed to Visionalist Entertainment Productions, 28345 Beck Road, Suite 404, Wixom, MI 48393. Tickets for the film premiere are \$25 and \$35, and are available on Ticketmaster.com or at the Fox Theatre box office. Call (248) 869-0096 for ticket information, or see www.ourvietnamgeneration.com.

Ivan Castro, of 7th Special Forces, an Army captain blinded in the line of duty in Iraq, is a special speaker. Master of ceremonies is Paul W. Smith, of News/Talk 760 WJR. The Michigan National Guard 126 Army band will give a special sound-off to each branch of the military. There will be other music, a candlelight vigil and a showing of a short film, "One Soldier's Story."

Macomb County's VVA Chapter 154 conducts an annual vigil for those still missing from the Vietnam War. The chapter color guard, The Point Team, formally guards a memorial to the MIAs for a 24-hour period each September at Oakland Hills Memorial Gardens in Novi.

They have vowed to do so until 52 Michigan soldiers' remains have been located.

"The documentary came to be when Keith Famie was driving past Oakland Hills in September of 2009 and saw us there during our annual vigil," Pat Daniels, of Chapter 154, said. "He said he had to stop and see what we



Photo submitted by Michelle Kirschke
Jeffery Rector, a master sergeant who works for the U.S. Army Reserve Center in Fraser, is featured in a new documentary on Vietnam veterans like himself. Staff members at Liz's Ham Café in Fraser are selling T-shirts to raise money and awareness for Keith Famie's "Our Vietnam."



Photo submitted by Mike Sand
Film producer Keith Famie interviews Lois Lyons who was a nurse in Vietnam for his upcoming documentary "Our Vietnam Generation" that premieres at the Fox Theatre on Jan. 28.

were doing. After talking to us and filming Chapter 154 there, he decided that the Vietnam vets' stories needed to be told."

Daniels said Famie videotaped a number of chapter members, the chapter's traveling memorial and Ruth Babcock, who assembled biographical books on Michigan's casualties that accompany the Michigan Vietnam Traveling Memorial. The memorial will be at the premiere.

Famie, whose brother served in Vietnam, filmed a motorcycle ride to the Dingell Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Detroit that supports the inpatients, at The Wall That Heals when it was presented in Clinton Township and an interview with Macomb County resident and former prisoner of war Digger O'Dell.

"He has done stuff on the Veterans Support Center and all the work Chapter 154 does," Daniels said. The center is in Roseville.

"He said it occurred to him while he was doing a World War II documentary that the Vietnam vets had become the caregivers for the World War II vets and the mentors for the Iraq and Afghanistan vets and that people needed to hear our stories," Daniels said.

"Two-thirds of us are already gone, and their stories are gone with them. We are losing the Vietnam vets at the same rate as the WWII veterans, and we are 20 years younger. This film is a chance to document some of those stories before they are gone too, so future

generations will be able to understand what we went through. This is not a war documentary but more a story of Vietnam vets who came home and went to work and became successful and contributed to society and this country," Daniels said.

"Chapter 154 is grateful to Keith Famie for doing this documentary and helping us spread the news about the good things the chapter does and the important part that all veterans have played in our freedom and America's success."

Mark Spooner, of Harrison Township, is president of Chapter 9. He and his daughter, who both served in the U.S. Marine Corps, took a trip to Vietnam that was filmed by Famie. Spooner visited a battlefield that had traumatic consequences during his tour of duty.

"He and his daughter were part of Operation Exchange of Hearts where children from the Children's Hospital (of Michigan) in Detroit made posters and cards for a children's hospital in Hanoi," Sand said. "Mark and Jennifer carried these posters and cards as their primary mission and then toured the battlefield of Hill 41. Jennifer served in Iraq, and the trip was very emotional and very healing for them both. There are two and half million Vietnam War stories."

Sand, a retired teacher, said he and buddies once put on a presentation about Vietnam at the Grosse Pointe War Memorial and a man in the audience had an emotional reaction.

They took him aside for a private discussion.

"He served on Okinawa during the (Vietnam) war, and was having a hard time with his memories. It turns out he was in charge of the body bags. So, even if someone wasn't in-country, you never know about someone's service unless you take the time to find out," he said.

Sand said that Vietnam vets' reluctance to bring up the war and talk about themselves is one reason Famie has had difficulty raising the funds for the project.

"A lot of vets don't want to talk about it and the public does not want to remember it, but I think that what Famie has done will provide tremendous education. The Famie production does not focus on the glory story. I hope our story will help recall the lessons of the past and improve our society," Sand said.

"A youth pastor I know wanted to know how to reach these kids that are coming home from war today and I said just to recognize their service, and welcome them home. Don't just tell them to 'get over it,' but listen to their stories," Sand said.

Help honor service

Jeffrey Rector is a Vietnam vet and master sergeant with the Army Reserve Center in Fraser, who is also featured in Famie's film. He heads up a funeral detail of volunteers, mostly veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, who perform free military honors at the funerals of veterans at the request of families.

He is looking for a donor who will purchase 50 of the \$25 tickets for the documentary to be given to 50 service members. Those who purchase six or more tickets sit with service members at the event.

"These junior enlisted (men and women) don't make a lot of money, and it would be great if they could go and be part of this experience," Rector said.

Rector's government cell phone number is (404) 324-1602.

Liz's Ham Café at 31500 Groesbeck Highway in Fraser has T-shirts for sale to support the film. Other supporters, besides VVA, are the Disabled American Veterans, VFW Posts 4659 and 9021 in Shelby Township and Warren, and two Oakland County Rotary clubs.

History project

The Veteran's History Project records all veterans' stories. The Library of Congress project also collects and preserves remembrances of civilian workers who supported war efforts.

Contact RSVP of Macomb at (586) 756-1430 for more information.

Benefits seminar

A seminar on benefits for vets and spouses is planned for 6 p.m. Thursday at the Trinity Lutheran Church community center, 38900 Harper Ave., Clinton Township. RSVP to the Wm. R. Hamilton Company at (586) 463-0577. The seminar includes speakers from the Great Lakes National Cemetery in Holly, the Macomb County Veterans Affairs office, and the funeral industry and a law office.

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