

WHAT DOES AN AMERICAN VETERAN MEAN TO ME?

By Ashley Honeycutt, Lessons of Vietnam Class--2009

My grandfather is a veteran. My uncle is a veteran. My great uncle is a veteran. I have grown up surrounded by veterans, but it wasn't until this past summer and the first semester of senior year that I learned to really value and appreciate these exceptional men and women. It was then that I found out what veterans have meant to me my entire life--and what they have done for me recently has been life-changing.

When I reflect on the veterans who were always there for me growing up, I can recall that they were some of the strongest and most compassionate individuals I have ever encountered. They were men at my church who loved to give me a pat on the back for a job well done. They were the ones who cried when I sang our National Anthem at my brother's baseball games. My grandfather, a World War II veteran, taught me to cherish the land of my birth. These men have always exemplified *integrity and righteousness* to me. They are my role models.

Then, I went to high school and began to learn about what these men I had known my entire life had actually done for me and for my country. *United States History* gave me a vague appreciation for what the men and women who served actually did to protect my freedom. But, the class that really helped me understand what *sacrifice* stood for was *Lessons of Vietnam* taught by Ms. Lindy Poling. This was a course that explored the controversial war that left such a vicious scar on our nation. We learned the most through compassionate veterans who took the time to visit and share their experiences and insights with our class. It really made an impression on me that these amazing Americans like General George Price would take the time to drive all the way to Millbrook High School just to speak to high school students. These veterans not only taught me about the Vietnam War, but they also taught me compassion and understanding.

I cannot write a paper about what an American veteran means to me without sharing how my life was suddenly given direction and purpose this past summer, thanks to an organization of veterans and their families. I attended *Tar Heel Girls State*, and was then selected to be one of two girls from North Carolina to participate in *Girls Nation* in Washington, D.C. Before going to *Girls State* at Catawba College, I had no idea what path my life would take. The ladies from the American Legion Auxiliary who facilitated Girls State and Girls Nation changed that. They became my friends, my mentors, and I love them dearly. I had always wanted to help people, but this program showed me that the way I would do this would be through politics. Veterans' organizations like the American Legion are helping my generation realize its potential every day, and I am eternally grateful that these veterans helped me realize mine.