

The Importance of a Veterans Memorial for Detroit

My name is Raymond Michael Sand; I have always been called Mike since I was a child. I grew up on the east side of Detroit in a blue collar family with roots tied to the manufacturing industry dating back to 1895 when my great grandfather came here from Eastern Europe. Julius Sand and Sons built a tool and machining business in downtown Detroit where Eastern Market stands today. Julius was a bricklayer with the Detroit Bricklayers Union, Local Two and started making high quality levels for the trades and eventually created his own successful family business which lasted until the Great Depression. Sand Levels are still manufactured to this day even though the original Sand's are not part of it.

While following the history of my great grandfather's business I have learned tremendously regarding the great city of Detroit and its surroundings. As a child of the 60's, I experienced firsthand much of the dynamics that put the City where it is today. I remember all the wonderful attractions, gardens and family events of the 50's. I saw the rise of the Motown Sound and the Detroit Rocker phenomenon. I also saw the decline with recessions, riots and apathy toward Detroit. Like most young males of the day I was considered "draft bait" and looked nervously at serving in the military during the Vietnam War.

In 1967 I decided to join the US Air Force as opposed to being drafted. I married my high school sweetheart, since I didn't know if I would be killed or wounded in the war. We wanted to spend as much time together as we could (we have been happily together for over 50 years now). The air force was a four year commitment rather than two, but since my father was a WWII veteran I felt his sense of patriotism so serving my country in a time of need was worth my sacrifice. At this time the tide had not fully turned regarding the war effort and it was still acceptable to serve. After 1968 the American attitude toward the war changed drastically. I came home in 1971 to a different America.

After my service I returned to a society that for the most part turned their backs on us and used a lot of derogatory terms regarding our service. It really hurt in so many ways. Fortunately I was able to use my skills and the GI Bill to work my way into the automotive trades and attend college to become a high school teacher and administrator. At Wayne State University (WSU) I studied Industrial Technology and Social Sciences where I learned even more about the history and importance of my home town. After graduation I had the privilege of working at the prestigious University-Liggett School in Grosse Pointe, Michigan where some of the most prominent people in the area attended and/or sent their children. Here I learned even more about the wonderful heritage of Detroit.

In the late 70's and early 80's Vietnam veterans began to "Come Home" to recognize one another for their service and sacrifices. It was a chilling period in our history. At this time I joined an up starting organization called Vietnam Veterans of America, (VVA) Detroit Chapter 9 located in the heart of the Cass Corridor also known at the time as the "Murder Capital of the World." We turned a rat infested,

trash filled, gutted and abandoned building into an active, viable veterans service center which still operates today and I am proud to have attained the rank of president in 2013. The center has housed and hosted a myriad of programs and events over the years including; town hall meetings, parades, neighborhood services, children's programs, Angel's Night headquarters and much, much, more. Today we host the Detroit Veterans Day Parade which had nearly 5000 participants last year, this included around 1000 Detroit Public School Junior ROTC cadets (which as an educator made me prouder than ever to be a Detroiter).

In 1989 I was asked by then governor, James Blanchard to serve on the Michigan Vietnam Memorial Monument Commission. I spent thirteen years working under three governors to acquire a site, develop a design, raise funding and support. In 2001, on Veterans Day, we dedicated the world class memorial on the capitol grounds. Throughout this effort and because of my involvement with our veterans I learned that not only were our Vietnam vets shunned and ignored, but so many others as well. The Korean War vets known as the "Forgotten Warriors" first got my attention, and then I learned about the "Polar Bears," Detroiters who fought the Bolsheviks on Russian soil after WWI. Then there was the Tuskegee Airmen, the Montford Point Marines who waited 70 years to be recognized. Additionally, there were our Colored and Native American troops who fought in the Civil War. The list goes on and on.

Our military history is so rich yet we do not have much to show for it. What there is has fallen into ruin and decay. Fort Detroit, Fort Wayne, the Broadhead Naval Armory, the Michigan State Fair 1939 War Memorial (which is crumbling), Douglas MacArthur (Belle Isle) bridge, Arsenal of Democracy, Rosie the Riveter, the Cold War Nike missile bases, just to name a few. So here we stand on the banks of the Detroit River where US military history so proudly hails and we have not honored nor have we recognized our many soldiers, sailors, marines, airmen, and coast guard members.

The Detroit Chapter of Vietnam Veterans of America formerly at the corner of Woodward at Temple had established a "park" to honor all our veterans which was originally supported by Mayor, Coleman A. Young and his council in the early 1980's. The veterans have maintained, cleaned, managed and improved the land for over thirty years. Plans were drawn and funds raised to complete the project and dedicate it to the people of Detroit. Recent area development plans raised questions as to whether that was the best site for the park. It was suggested by the DEGC, City Council, Planning and Development people that we search for a new site. It was recommended that we look at Cass Park or Gabriel Richard Park on the river. All agreed that these options would be the best place for all the above reasons.

We have the support of area politicians, the metro Detroit veteran community, WSU department of history, the UAW and many more. The main issue is addressing the matter of exactly where the park will be. We have a preliminary design, site survey and marketing strategies as well as experienced people who have succeeded in projects such as this in the past. As with the State Vietnam Memorial and most others, site control is paramount to any further advancement in the goal.

There are hundreds of thousands of Detroiters of all races, colors and creeds who have put their lives on the line serving this nation for you and for me. Isn't it time we step up and do something to honor and recognize them?