

Student Handout
Oakland Museum of California
What's Going On? California and the Vietnam Era
Lesson Plan #2

1968: Year of Social Change and Turning Point in Vietnam and the U.S.

Oral History

Winnie

Winnie was a nurse in the Vietnam War.

See if they were alive or not. And the hardest ones among those of course generally they were either head injuries or had a lot of blood loss, so they were unconscious. But every once in awhile for one reason or another we'd have someone who was awake and he would be back there alone. Average age 19 umm. Family an ocean away and knowing he that he was dying and generally speaking in excruciating pain from the wounds that he had received.

So the only thing I could do as a nurse for those patients was to give them pain medication and it was against everything that I had been raised with to allow this person to die alone and sometimes I carried it a step beyond that. It would people here would call mercy killing in order to get them out of their pain in a situation that we knew we weren't going to try to save them. I guess I am getting emotional too, I'm sorry.

I had..I can remember to this day the day that I gave up on God, you know, when we were really busy in the ICU and we had these swinging silver doors. They'd bang the gurneys coming through the doors. We had a number of burns to come in that day and I remember hearing the bang of the doors and, I mean. We worked 12 hour shifts 6 days a week and sometimes when we were really busy we would end up working 14, 16 hours a day, because it was impossible to leave we were too busy. I was totally exhausted, and we had been running, I couldn't even get to the bathroom because we were so busy, and I remember thinking oh please God don't let it be another burn and then turning around and smelling it and knowing that it was another burn and just as I was heading to get supplies, saying to myself, there can be no God, there can be no God for there to be a place like this to exist.

So when I got home to this lovely little southern family that still had aspirations of my being a real southern belle and marrying a doctor and living in a big house on top of a hill. I came back using four letter words and having had sex and not believing at all in any of. It is like ... what was important to them was the shape of my shoes, the length of my skirt, my hair-do, my make-up, my fingernails. I just didn't belong there anymore. And so what I decided I had to do. Need I mind you, they still believed in God, they still believed in our government, they still believed that Americans were particularly wonderful people in the world. And I at that point had found out that American soldiers really were not all that different from any other kind of soldier. That we were people like any else around the world.

So I moved to California where skirt lengths varied from butt length to ankle length and nobody cared what length my skirt was. And people could wear boots you could wear sandals people



didn't care. Most people let their hair grow long and maybe washed it once a week or something. So that part was great.

But part of the problem I had was that with my family with their concerns with the soldiers, actually that came much later, later on they considered the vets to have been basically cowards and dope addicts and that was why we lost the war but this was much earlier than that.

The big issue for me was that I got to California in terms of feeling like I belonged was that out here I actually saw a guy in a wheelchair, very reminiscent of any one of the patients that I could have taken care of, all of the quadriplegics or triple amputees or whatever, and they booed him off of a stage because of his participation, having gone to Vietnam.

And at that point I decided that I no longer wanted to belong, I didn't want to belong to any of the people in this country. And that was about the point when a lot of us actually decided to return to country instead I just got into backpacking and scuba diving and winter camping. I mean if I could get 10 days off in the mountains all by myself that is what I did.

