

Barnegat's Vietnam Memorial

By Pat Johnson

The Foundation of the New Jersey Vietnam Veterans' Memorial and Vietnam Era Museum located in Holmdel expands its vision with the appointment of Thy Cavagnaro, its first South Vietnamese board member. In early January, Cavagnaro of Barnegat, received a phone call from the Board Chairman, Major General Clark Martin, a Vietnam War Veteran who served as Commander of the New Jersey Air National Guard for 23 years (1981-2004), congratulating her on being voted in unanimously by the rest of the Board members.

Barnegat's Vietnam Memorial continued...

“As the first Vietnamese Board member for the nation’s only facility that has both a Vietnam veterans memorial for the state and a museum dedicated to the history of the era of the Vietnam War and not just of the war, I’m really looking forward to being an integral part of the content that the museum will be adding,” she said on her Facebook page, “Thanking Vietnam Veterans in Barnegat.”

In 2018, Thy and her husband Jimmy installed a memorial stone in the center of Barnegat at the Frederick Watts Gazebo Park and except for the COVID lockdown years, an annual ceremony there has attracted hundreds of veterans.



Vietnam War Veterans Memorial in Barnegat.
Photo credit: Pat Johnson.

Years before this, Cavagnaro was already looking for ways to express gratitude to the veterans of Vietnam who fought to save South Vietnam from the Communist takeover. Her extended family was able to escape the fall of Saigon just hours shy of her country’s surrender on April 30, 1975. She was only a year old at the time and doesn’t remember much of that narrow escape, but Cavagnaro has compiled the families’ story --those last few days when they lived through bombings, capture by soldiers, miraculous turns of fate, a near drowning, a perilous sea voyage and finally safety on May 7 when the U.S. military could offer assistance. The refugees went from

the Philippines to a tent city on Guam to a barracks in Fort Indiantown Gap in Pennsylvania and finally finding stability with a sponsoring family in East Brunswick. Her entire family was granted citizenship as political refugees

Recently, Cavagnaro talked about her personal mission to thank Vietnam veterans. As a young person, her family never spoke of the horrific events of the war and she grew up as American as her peers. But in 2015, while watching a documentary with her husband about the fall of Saigon, she finally realized her own tragic story. “There was a shot of the USNS Sgt. Truman Kimbro cargo ship that had carried refugees from the Philippines to Guam and I realized I was on that ship! “It sparked an interest and I forced my parents to tell me the story. They were reluctant, my mother would cry and then I would cry but I succeeded in capturing their memories.” It also stirred an immense well of gratitude toward the American soldiers who had tried valiantly to save her country from the Communists.

Cavagnaro also contacted various veterans’ groups such as the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the American Legion. She decided the biggest impact she could make would be to put up a monument. “I approached the town and with the help of certain key people got the ball rolling.”

The town suggested the gazebo park and she and her husband Jimmy designed and purchased the monument. “It’s the only monument of its kind to Vietnam veterans from a Vietnamese refugee. I’d love to see other towns do it. The first year we held the ceremony we had veterans from all over the country attend. We were blown away.”

The first dedication ceremony was covered by Fox Philly, as a Fox news anchor at the time, Lucy Noland was one of the guest speakers. The newspaper publicity about the ceremonies became a conduit to the Vietnamese communities in the area.



Memorial founder Thy Cavagnaro.
Photo Credit: Pat Johnson.

The Cavagnaros also gave thank you dinners for Vietnam veterans that combined American dishes like pizza with Cavagnaro's favorite Vietnamese fare. "We also collected military information so that the guests could connect with each other. Afterwards their sons and daughters would thank us saying their fathers had never spoken about the war but now felt able to do so. Barriers were broken but all we were trying to do was to convey our thanks."

Thy Cavagnaro has also given school presentations about her family escaping Vietnam. "It's an interactive presentation where I ask them to put themselves in our shoes—having your country fall and having to make hard decisions to be able to survive."

On February 14, Thy Cavagnaro was inducted into the board of the New Jersey Vietnam Veterans' Memorial and Vietnam Era Museum.

Her experience as a Vietnam refugee will inform a new \$12 million addition to the museum that carries the story of the war into today. Besides her unique

personal story, she has other qualities that will serve the board—as a project manager for Canon, she has organizational and managerial skills that will prove useful.

And she organizing this year's Thanking Vietnam Veterans in Barnegat event. On March 29, Vietnam War Veterans Day, a ceremony thanking veterans was held inside at Barnegat High School.

To read more about her story find Thanking Vietnam Veterans in Barnegat on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.