

'We Are Not Properly Honoring the Sacrifices of Our Vietnam Veterans'

A high school senior and former Voice of Democracy winner in Connecticut used his podcast platform to better educate his generation on the Vietnam War in hopes of bridging a gap before it's too late

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As soon as the LIVE icon lights up, listeners of WWPT, 90.3 FM, in Westport, Connecticut, can expect an award-winning broadcast from 17-year-old Jason Lessing, an avid sports podcaster.

A Staples High School senior in Westport, Lessing's sports podcast earned him and his partners The John Drury High School Radio Award for the best sports talk program in the country last year.

But like any young idealist with a hunger to widen his worldview, Lessing, who won the 2021 *Voice of Democracy* contest at VFW Post 399 in Westport, has strived to understand the machine that operates, impacts and influences the country's populace.

"I've often focused on sports talk programming for the show," said Lessing, who finished as the VFW Department of Connecticut *VOD* contest's runner-up in April 2021. "Over time though, I've been trying to shift the show more toward public affairs topics that might be interesting to our audience, which is largely high school students and their families, as well as some other members of the local community."

While attending the Department of Connecticut's *VOD* award ceremony in April 2021 in Wallingford, Connecticut, a speech by Department Quartermaster Ron Rusakiewicz on his experiences during the Vietnam War awoke a thirst for answers in Lessing.

'A CRITICAL LEARNING POINT FOR ME'

Sitting among dozens of veterans, peers and families of varied ages and generations, Lessing

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began to wonder if his stunted knowledge of the Vietnam War applied to an entire generation held to subjective history curriculum across the country today.

“I learned a lot just from his brief speech, and it struck me that most high school students learn very little about the Vietnam War in school,” Lessing said. “I wanted to explore the reasons for that, as well as potentially do my part to help educate other high school students about the war.”

Lessing delved into strenuous research on the Vietnam War, assembling a list of experts and veterans to interview for a podcast episode to shed light and bridge the gap between them and his generation. He relied on Matt Seebeck at VFW Post 603 in Norwalk, Connecticut, about three miles west of Westport, as well as Post 399 Quartermaster Phil Delgado in finding Vietnam War veterans willing to share their stories.

In formulating a perspective on the Vietnam War by comparing experiences shared by those who lived it and that of most high school curriculum, Lessing’s first discovery was a sad one.

“What my research made clear is that we are not properly honoring the sacrifices of our Vietnam veterans,” Lessing said. “I did not have an awareness that the political debate around the war negatively affected how we as a country treated veterans upon their return. That was a critical learning point for me from the interviews with veterans, and I strongly believe we can never again allow that to happen in the U.S.”

‘I ONLY SCRATCHED THE SURFACE’

When the podcast episode aired on the local radio station in May 2021, Lessing provided a platform clothed in an array of voices that depicted the perceptions of teachers and veterans on the Vietnam War in hopes of encouraging thoughtful and respectful conversations.

Instead of criticizing history curriculum and pinning veterans and teachers against one another, Lessing’s podcast ventured into an area where ideas transcended argument and relied on helping one another to better educate the younger generations for years to come.

“I didn’t want to criticize current curriculum but rather explore the reasons why Vietnam seems to not get as much attention as it deserves and hopefully make the case that high school students need to learn more about it,” Lessing said. “I had a number of conversations with students who said they had learned something from it. I was also excited to hear from Caroline Davis, a history teacher in one of Westport’s middle schools, who said she wanted to include my podcast in her curriculum this year.”

Lessing also accepted that one episode is not enough to enlighten his generation’s perception on the cost of war, but he hopes it will be a step down an honest path toward understanding.

“There are so many lessons from the war, and I know I only scratched the surface,” Lessing said. “For me, policy questions were probably less important than what I learned about both the successes and struggles of Vietnam veterans in their lives during and after Vietnam. It was a critical reminder to focus on not just the policy decisions, but also the fact that every policy decision has a massive effect on our service members, who are the people tasked with carrying out that policy.”

Lessing plans to continue to work toward hearing more from veterans across a wide variety of topics centered on unifying that population with his generation.

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