

I was born in a US Air Force base hospital near Madrid, Spain. My father performed maintenance on the F-4 Phantoms and C-135 tanker aircraft. The Torrejon Air Force Base was a mobile base used as a holding place for U.S. aircraft and troops in the late 1970s. In order to fly true missions with ammunition, airmen traveled to Aviano AFB in Italy or Incirlik (IN-sir-lick) AFB in Turkey because Spain was not part of NATO then and therefore, our troops could not load armaments out of the Spanish base. Especially during the end of the Cold War, there was no certainty of what would happen next, as nuclear war felt as though it could happen at any moment. My father and many of his fellow airmen received a top-secret clearance because they were working on sensitive equipment such as aircraft components and classified arms and nuclear weapons. My mother lived off base with me and my younger sister until I was two, when my father was transferred stateside to finish his enlistment. Until my father shared his story of service through VHP last year, I really hadn't known much about his time in the military.

When I agreed to be a teacher advisor for VHP three years ago, I never would have guessed the impact that this school club would have on my students and their families. I expected that this club would help support my students' communication and writing skills, which is why I was excited about it initially, but now I am passionate about supporting VHP because I see the impact it has on my students' character, leadership, and relationships.

One of my students, Hannalei Potempa, wrote about her grandfather for her first story in VHP. The experience was unforgettable for both Hannalei and her family. Her grandfather had served in Vietnam but, like many other Vietnam vets, he had not talked much about his time there to his wife or to anyone. As he told his story of service to his granddaughter that day, he relayed his pride at having served his country but the pain he encountered upon his return. "Unfortunately, his arrival to the United States was bittersweet because of the misconception many people had about the Vietnam War and those who served in it." Hannahlei wrote: "These soldiers

made sacrifices for the safety of American citizens and their freedom. Serving in the Vietnam War was an act of selflessness, and the veterans deserve respect.” After Hannahlei’s grandfather passed, and I received an email from her mother Denise that she was wondering when the books would be published because her grandmother wanted to purchase enough books to gift one to each of her children. Denise and her brother and sisters took their Mom on a trip once a year, and wanted to be able to give the books to all them for this special reunion. Denise wrote back to let me know what a meaningful tribute reading this story was and how special it is that each of the children now have a piece of their father in this special book.

After writing two stories for VHP, one of my club members, Sophie Cartwright came to me with a news story about a WW2 veteran in Oklahoma celebrating his 93rd birthday whose only wish was to receive birthday cards. Sophie asked to organize a drive to get cards and gifts from our students to send to him. You see, this club isn’t just valuable because of the education students receive when interviewing veterans and writing their stories- VHP makes a difference because it builds a bridge from the past to the present. My students are developing real connections and relationships with the veteran community because of VHP, and in turn, they are growing in character and empathy.

As a faculty advisor for VHP, I am so honored to volunteer for and support this organization. I am so grateful for the amazing leadership provided by the Board and the Executive Team at VHP. They make this easy for any teacher to step in and make this program work at their schools.

As an educator, I am grateful for the experiential learning, leadership & character-building opportunities my students have with this organization. My club leaders, student members and their families, who have also become enthusiastic supporters of VHP are also getting involved in other veteran organizations such as Honor Flight and Daughters of the American

Revolution because of the passion VHP has ignited in them to serve the veteran community.

As a daughter, I am grateful for the way this organization has strengthened my connection with my own father. My father attended a book signing reception with me last spring. I have a book and photos I will treasure long after he has passed, and our relationship is stronger than ever because of this connection. Last year, my club President, Sabrina Arevalo, who also interviewed her grandfather, a Vietnam veteran, for her first story, had him sitting by her side as she accepted a scholarship for her dedication to VHP. I have a drawer full of thank you notes from families like Hannahlei's, Sophie's and Sabrina's who are so grateful for the family connections and relationships that were strengthened because of VHP.

As a citizen, I am grateful to all the veterans here tonight who both answered the call of duty and were willing to say yes again by sharing their stories of service, allowing my students and I to learn from them and honor them with our books.

Thank you to all of the special guests here today for your continued support of this amazing organization. God Bless You.