

## Stockton Becomes First University in the Region to Install Honor Chair Remembering POW/MIAs

***For Immediate Release; Photos on [Flickr](#)***

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**Galloway, NJ** - A light shines 24/7 on an empty honor chair outside the Veterans Lounge at Stockton University to hold a space on campus for prisoners of war (POW) and those missing in action (MIA).

Stockton's Office of Veteran Affairs and representatives of the New Jersey chapter of Rolling Thunder, a nonprofit aimed at honoring POWs and MIAs of all wars, formally dedicated the honor chair on March 4 during a Vietnam veterans appreciation event.

Rolling Thunder National's POW/MIA Honor Chair Program brings daily reminders of the courageous men and women who have not returned home from war by placing empty chairs with plaques in public venues across the country. Stockton is the first university in the region to display an honor chair.

Tom O'Donnell, assistant dean of Students and Veteran Affairs, said, that Vietnam veterans "faced adversity head on, and the outcome was amazing."

These men and women are leaders, and "we owe a lot to this great group of individuals. President Harvey Kesselman has been supportive of our veterans since day one. About one third of Stockton's first class was made up of Vietnam veterans, and he studied, lived and graduated with them," he said.

Today, Stockton serves more than 600 veterans and active-duty service members and is ranked #6 among the best colleges and universities nationwide for veterans by the Military Times' "Best for Vets: Colleges 2016."

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Members of Stockton's Student Veterans Organization (SVO), Veteran Advisory Board, faculty, staff and the community attended the dedication to show their support for those who served. Frank Cerreto, professor of Mathematics, sang the national anthem, and The Stockton Faculty Band played music from the Vietnam Era.

"From its founding, Stockton was run and led by veterans," said Kesselman. He remembered the late Peter Mercado, a former dean at Stockton who was a Marine Vietnam veteran and received the Bronze Star, the Purple Heart, the Combat Action Ribbon and over 10 additional citations and awards. "He was the first major force in my life," he said.

If it weren't for Stockton's veterans, we wouldn't be what we are today, added Kesselman, noting that veterans are a part of Stockton's entire history.

Forty-seven years ago on March 4, Marco Polo Smigliani, an America's Patriot Veterans advocate and a member of Stockton's Veteran Advisory Board, was in Vietnam's A Shau Valley. He shared the story of an ambush where four of his fellow marines were killed. "I took an AK-47 round and I patched myself up, and I saw my friend Billy Norton laying on his belly. I went over there to help him and an RPG went off and almost blew my arm off," he said.

"The reason I'm sharing this with you today is because this is what it's really all about. You see all these men and women. It's difficult to try to bring you to that terrible environment that we were in 47 years ago today," he said.

Three Vietnam veterans who currently work at Stockton were recognized during the ceremony: Russell Konrady, carpentry crew supervisor, Daniel Nigro, carpenter, and Milton Traub Davis III, assistant supervisor of building repairs.

Stockton student veteran Paul Garraty, sergeant-at-arms and president-elect of the SVO, shared, "If it is any consolation, please know that the generations of war fighters after you see you as some of the roughest and toughest warriors this nation has ever called upon. We all forever aspire to be more like you."

Kesselman recalled the bus loads of Stockton community members who traveled to Washington D.C. in November 1982 for the opening of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. "It was the most incredible experience of my life, and I still remember it today," he said.

He noted that his wife, Lynne Kesselman, was involved with the memorial as part of her internship through the Washington Internship Program. Kesselman's focus was on the fundraising effort working for the founder of the memorial fund, Jan C. Scruggs. She still remembers "the hundreds of heartfelt, handwritten notes pinned to dollar bills, sent in from loved ones from all over the country."

Paul Berenotto, president of Rolling Thunder's New Jersey Chapter 4, gave "an overdue, heartfelt welcome home," to the Vietnam veterans in the audience. He led a missing man ceremony in which he explained the table setting with six empty chairs representing the men and women from all branches of the service and civilians who were or are missing and with us in spirit.

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He explained the slice of lemon for the bitter fate, the pinch of salt for the tears shed and a burning candle for hope.

The community gathered around an unoccupied chair for the formal dedication of the honor chair.

The chair, reclaimed from a yard sale, was sanded, but the scars are too deep to disappear, explained Berenotto. "Instead of casting it aside, we accept the scars, for they are not flaws. They don't define it. They give it character. Instead of discarding it, we give it a new purpose," he said.

That purpose is to give daily reminders that we cannot forget those who did not make it home.

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