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News

TRENTON: Vietnam War veteran goes back for dedication of school in honor of fallen trio

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By Francesca Chilargi

TRENTON — A Vietnam War veteran now has closure.

John Craven, 63; his wife, Gail, 61; and their daughter, Adrienne Bell, 34, joined about two dozen others and traveled to Ea Mlay, a rural village in Vietnam, for a dedication ceremony April 29 for a junior high school that is dear to Craven's heart.

The junior high school has 284 students enrolled from sixth- through ninth- grades.

"It was fulfilling to see the students entertain," John Craven said. "The students did some singing, dancing and several of the teachers sang a song, and it was just really special."

Craven's interest in Southeast Asia goes back more than 40 years, when he was in the Army's 70th Combat Engineer Battalion. His mission in Vietnam began in 1965 and ended Nov. 29, 1969.

The school he visited in April was built in honor of his three fallen comrades, Wayne Elkins, George Davenport and Bill McLaughlin.

Craven has been able to mend the guilt over their deaths that he shouldered for years through his involvement in the Development of Vietnam Endeavors Fund, known as the DOVE Fund.

He spearheaded the school project for the nonprofit organization.

The organization works closely with the U.S. Department of Foreign Wars and Vietnamese community officials to build schools, water-treatment systems and medical facilities.

All of the proceeds go directly toward the DOVE Fund's projects as members cover their own expenses.

The junior high school marked the DOVE Fund's 40th school.

Before the two-story school with six classrooms and two large restroom facilities was built, some children were attending school elsewhere and others were not going at all.

The ones going to school were using classrooms that were tainted with mold, deteriorating and had leaking roofs.

A majority of the people in Vietnam live in poverty and have an average annual income of \$400, Craven said. They are

required to pay for education, but because many cannot afford to attend school, they sacrifice education.

The guests of honor at the dedication ceremony were the Cravens and their daughter, along with Pat Youngs, the widow of Elkins, and their son, Wayne Elkins Jr., and his wife, Tracey.

The significant part of the ceremony, Craven said was having the widow, her son and his wife participate with him in the ribbon cutting.

"It was huge and it was very heartwarming to see the pride they had," he said.

Since returning home, Craven said he noticed he has released a lot of the anxiety he had carried with him about the school project.

"After that dedication, I felt such a relief, such a calmness, physically as well as emotionally," he said. "It's got to be because I left a lot of feelings of frustration there."

Craven is raising the remaining \$16,000 of the \$63,000 total cost of the school by giving presentations to local organizations.

Another source of funding for construction of the school is Craven's recent self-published book, "A Legacy of Hope."

The book tells of Craven's struggles with his war experience and his reluctance to cope with those memories until the past few years.

Next, the Cravens will help raise scholarship money for the DOVE Fund's tuition-assistance program for its schools that covers expenses for students based on need and performance.

In sixth grade, it costs a Vietnamese student \$50 a year to attend school. It is \$75 a year for grades seven through nine.

To help out, visit www.jecraven.com or www.dovefund.org.

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