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LETTER SPOTLIGHT: KATHRYN LERCH

## Park Tudor project chronicles stories of veterans

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"Peace came at a high cost for wartime vets," (May 25) is a particularly stirring commentary by The Star's Jane Lichtenberg. She observes that Indiana veterans "for the most part, lead ordinary lives," and therefore "it's easy to forget about their service to this nation."

Our national unawareness has been made worse, because, in her words, "Schools don't emphasize U.S. history and the principles on which this nation was founded. Perhaps if young people learned the stories of these veterans, history would come alive for them and they would be inspired to learn more."

I am writing to report that over the past several years in Indianapolis, students with faculty guidance have worked together to actually carry out what Lichtenberg is recommending in her commentary, with the undertaking of the Park Tudor Legacy Initiative.

Park Tudor students have spent the past two years learning about our veterans from the Civil War through the Gulf War. They have worked with over 700 original, unpublished letters, diaries and photographs received from veterans and their families from across the country. They spent their summer vacation, weekends and after-school hours transcribing, researching and editing fascinating wartime letters.

In addition, students in my Western civilization class have recorded, transcribed and edited oral histories for over 120 veterans from World War II through the Gulf War.

The mission of our Legacy Initiative is to actively involve students in the study of history and to develop their critical thinking and writing skills. We also want to develop an awareness of self-sacrifice by our veterans. Another major goal is to publish an anthology every two to three years. In April, we published our first book, "Words of War: Wartime Memories from the Civil War Through the Gulf War" with the Guild Press. It is available at Park Tudor and in bookstores.

In order to achieve our mission, we would like to connect with many more American veterans and their families. Thanks to a Star article in November 2000, "History's own voice," the community of Indianapolis responded to our first call for unpublished letters, and we received hundreds of items.

One donor wrote that "the letters he passed on . . . have now begun a new life in the pages of this excellent book." As a result of community support, my students have discovered the thrill of learning more about American history and what our veterans have accomplished.

Whenever my students put themselves into "their" veteran's shoes, whether in the Civil War or as their veteran flies in a Harrier aircraft over Kuwait, they are excited about working with "real" history. Veterans' stories, letters and photographs are truly worth preserving. Historian Andrew Carroll, author of "War Letters," wrote the following about the Legacy Initiative: "A

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unique project . . . has come to fruition, and best of all (Kathryn Lerch's) team of students have had a major role in editing and assembling . . . 'Words of War.' With this unique project, which she would like replicated in more schools across the country, she has . . . inspired students to excel in an area usually reserved for professional historians.

"The larger Legacy Initiative project also strives to connect the veteran community with Park Tudor's students and their families, and a percentage of the proceeds from this publication will be returned to a veterans group."

For more information on the scope of our project, plus speaker's programs open to the community, please visit our Web site: <http://www.park.tudor.pvt.k12.in.us/Legacy/index.htm>.

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Lerch is director of the Legacy Initiative at Park Tudor School in Indianapolis.