

Teachers' Guide Module 5

THE WALL AS HEALER

The Wall, *The Three Servicemen* statue, and the Vietnam Women's Memorial honor all those who served in the Vietnam War. In addition, this collective memorial has helped to heal the deep wounds created by the war. This module contains information about the designer of The Wall, Maya Ying Lin, as well as poetry about the Memorial. You may use this module to help students understand the effect of The Wall, and you may even encourage students to design their own memorial.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

At the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

- examine the experience of soldiers returning home from Vietnam;
- describe the effect of The Wall on a nation divided by war;
- discuss the shift that took place in war memorial design with the selection of the The Wall; and
- explain the controversy and compromises made to erect The Wall on the National Mall in Washington, D.C.

MATERIALS

The *Echoes From The Wall* Teachers' Guide should be used in conjunction with a history textbook. You also will need:

- Poem — The Wall, by Doug Anderson (module 5, appendix A)
- Poem — Christmas in Child's World, by Stephen Sossaman (module 5, appendix B)
- Speech by General Alexander M. Haig, Jr. given at The Wall on Memorial Day 1999 (module 5, appendix C)

BACKGROUND

Maya Ying Lin's early 1980s design for the nation's Vietnam Veterans Memorial was a dramatic departure from other monuments. It was not only her design of the memorial, but also the projected siting of the monument on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., that aroused the ire of several individuals and groups. But controversy has attended a number of American icons, such as the Washington Monument, the Lincoln Memorial, and the Franklin Delano Roosevelt National Memorial (whether he should be portrayed with or without his wheelchair). However, the controversy over the Vietnam Veterans Memorial has proved to be one of the most contentious debates regarding monuments in public memory. Perhaps it was fitting given the divisive nature of the war. Some individuals were offended by the abstract nature of a black granite memorial in a space that consisted of only edifices that were white or marble, most specifically the U.S. Capitol, the Washington Monument, and the Lincoln Memorial. Others argued that The Wall, in its abstraction, was too radical a departure from the figurative tradition of honoring the American warrior. Consensus was difficult to reach.

The greatest challenge for any artist, of a memorial to be placed in such an important public space as the Mall, is to satisfy their own individual creativity; address the needs of the constituency, in this case the Vietnam veterans; and the needs of the nation as a whole. Trying to find the right balance for this is very difficult.

ACTIVITY: COMPARING THE VETERANS' WELCOME HOME IN WORLD WAR II TO THE VIETNAM VETERANS' HOMECOMING

Have students look at photographs of ticker tape parades honoring veterans returning from World War II. Explain how the initial public reception of Vietnam veterans differed from the public reception veterans in earlier wars received upon returning home. Guest speakers can be very effective for this activity.

ACTIVITY: THE EFFECT OF THE VIETNAM VETERANS MEMORIAL

Discuss the effect The Wall has had in healing the wounds this country incurred during the Vietnam War. Conduct interviews with veterans about their homecoming and their personal reflections about the building of The Wall and its significance to them. Discuss the effect of *The Three Servicemen* statue and the Vietnam Women's Memorial.

ACTIVITY: MAYA YING LIN AND THE VIETNAM VETERANS MEMORIAL

Maya Ying Lin designed the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Have the class discuss the following points.

- Maya Ying Lin's statement about her design.
- How Maya Ying Lin's design was chosen for The Wall.
- The reason(s) she gave for designing such a simple abstract memorial, rather than a more traditional war monument with figures of soldiers.
- The funding source for The Wall and why this was important to the project sponsors.
- The important figures who played a role in the process of raising funds for and supporting The Wall. Why were these people important?
- The symbolism of Maya Ying Lin's design. Your thoughts about the appropriateness of the design.
- The controversies over the design and placement of The Wall.
- How the differences between the various groups were resolved. Your thoughts regarding the appropriateness of these compromises.

ACTIVITY: POETRY ABOUT THE WALL

Have students read Doug Anderson's poem, The Wall, (module 5, appendix A) and Stephen Sossaman's poem, Christmas in Child's World (module 5, appendix B).

Lead a discussion. Be sure to include the following points:

- Doug Anderson uses the metaphors of a scar and a crook of the arm to cradle the head to describe The Wall. How can it be both?
- What does Doug Anderson mean when he asks, "How long a wall?"
- Why does Stephen Sossaman think there is no model kit for The Wall?

ACTIVITY: MAYA YING LIN

View the Academy Award-winning documentary, *Maya Lin: A Strong Clear Vision* and/or read the following statement explaining her idea for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Discuss the thinking behind Maya Ying Lin's design.

Statement by Maya Ying Lin as part of her competition submission, March 1981

Walking through this park-like area, the memorial appears as a rift in the earth, a long, polished, black stone wall, emerging from and receding into the earth. Approaching the memorial, the ground slopes gently downward and the low walls emerging on either side, growing out of the earth, extend and converge at a point below and ahead. Walking into this grassy site contained by the walls of the memorial we can barely make out the carved names upon the memorial's walls. These names, seemingly infinite in number, convey the sense of overwhelming numbers, while unifying these individuals into a whole.

The memorial is composed not as an unchanging monument, but as a moving composition to be understood as we move into and out of it. The passage itself is gradual; the descent to the origin slow, but it is at the origin that the memorial is to be fully understood. At the intersection of these walls, on the right side, is carved the date of the first death. It is followed by the names of those who died in the war, in chronological order. These names continue on this wall appearing to recede into the earth at the wall's end. The names resume on the left wall as the wall emerges from the earth, continuing back to the origin where the date of the last death is carved at the bottom of this wall. Thus the war's beginning and end meet; the war is "complete," coming full circle, yet broken by the earth that bounds the angle's open side, and continued within the earth itself. As we turn to leave, we see these walls stretching into the distance, directing us to the Washington Monument, to the left, and the Lincoln Memorial, to the right, thus bringing the Vietnam Memorial into an historical context. We the living are brought to a concrete realization of these deaths.

Brought to a sharp awareness of such a loss, it is up to each individual to resolve or come to terms with this loss. For death, is in the end a personal and private matter, and the area contained with this memorial is a quiet place, meant for personal reflection and private reckoning. The black granite walls, each two hundred feet long, and ten feet below ground at their lowest point (gradually ascending toward ground level) effectively act as a sound barrier, yet are of such a height and length so as not to appear threatening or enclosing. The actual area is wide and shallow, allowing for a sense of privacy, and the sunlight from the memorial's southern exposure along with the grassy park

surrounding and within its walls contribute to the serenity of the area. Thus this memorial is for those who have died, and for us to remember them.

The memorial's origin is located approximately at the center of the site: its legs each extending two hundred feet towards the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial. The walls, contained on one side by the earth, are ten feet below ground at their point of origin, gradually lessening in height, until they finally recede totally into the earth, at their ends. The walls are to be made of a hard, polished black granite, with the names to be carved in a simple Trajan letter. The memorial's construction involves recontouring the area within the wall's boundaries, so as to provide for an easily accessible descent, but as much of the site as possible should be left untouched. The area should remain as a park, for all to enjoy.

TEAM LEARNING

TEAM ACTIVITY: EFFECT OF THE VIETNAM VETERANS MEMORIAL

The Wall was created to honor all the American soldiers who served during the Vietnam War. The effect of the Memorial was difficult to anticipate. Because there was so much dissent about American involvement in Vietnam, many soldiers returning home did not receive heroes' welcomes. Many felt snubbed and let down by their country. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial, dedicated in 1982, has done much to heal those wounds and to honor and remember those American soldiers who lost their lives in the Vietnam War.

Divide your students into teams and have them help their classmates understand the effect the Memorial had in healing the wounds this country experienced during the Vietnam War.

Students can do this in many ways.

1. Maya Ying Lin designed The Wall. Direct your students to give a report to the class on how Maya Ying Lin's design was chosen for the Memorial. What can they tell the class about the reason(s) she gave for designing such a simple abstract memorial, rather than a more traditional war monument with figures of soldiers?

Or

2. Have students use the [The Virtual Wall](#) to determine if someone on The Wall was from their city. If they find someone on The Wall from their city, have them consult old yearbooks from their school library to determine whether that person went to their high school. If the students find a match, have them read about the person in the school yearbook.

- What did they discover about this person?
- What seems to be similar about this veteran and their high school friends?
- What seems to be different about this veteran and their high school friends?

3. Have students design a memorial for Vietnam veterans. Tell them to imagine that it is 1980 and a call has gone out for designs for a memorial to honor soldiers who died during the Vietnam War. They should create a pencil sketch and a scale model of a memorial to enter in the competition. They should then write a statement explaining their design and the choices they made in creating it. Ask them to share their team's design with the class.

Or

4. Have students design a memorial for people who served in the U.S. Armed Forces during the Persian Gulf War. They should write a statement explaining their design and the choices they made in creating it. Ask them to share their team's design with the class.

Or

5. Have students discuss why *The Three Servicemen* statue was added in 1984. They should also discuss why the Vietnam Women's Memorial was added in 1993.