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MY VIEW PAULA NIXON

To honor veterans, listen to their stories

By Paula Nixon

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Holes in Our Hearts is a recently published collection of poetry, essays, and stories written by 55 of New Mexico's active military, veterans, and their family members and caregivers. It was published by Southwest Writers with a grant provided by New Mexico Arts.

When I saw the call for submissions last spring, I wasn't considering participating until I visited my dad in Colorado, and he opened a creaky wooden military-issued trunk. He pulled out a green wool uniform with brass castle pins on the lapels signifying his service in the Corps of Engineers. I started asking questions and began to write down the story of his time in the U.S. Army.

Dad and Mom were stationed in Alaska in the late 1950s between the Korean and Vietnam Wars. It was a big move for the newly married couple both just graduated from Kansas State University. Dad majored in civil engineering and had spent two summers during college working on the Alcan Highway which led to him being assigned to Alaska. They spent two light-filled summers and one dark cold winter in Anchorage. I was born on Elmendorf Air Force Base in the spring a few months before we returned to Kansas where Dad completed his service in the Army Reserves.

By the late '60s, Dad's service was years behind him. We lived in western Kansas where he spent long hours at his small consulting firm. Mom cooked, cleaned and drove three kids to school, piano lessons and football practice. We sat down to dinner together every evening, but I don't remember that we talked much about the Vietnam War or the protests that filled the nightly newscasts.

I was young but old enough to take in the stories on the *Huntley-Brinkley Report* and *Life* magazine. Those images stayed with me and contributed to my view of war and the military — all mixed up with my parent's history of serving in the Army during a time of peace. It was a complicated viewpoint — I had respect for the bravery and sacrifice of those who served, but also doubt and anger over the wars our country engaged in and how we treated veterans when they came home.

After *Holes in Our Hearts* was published last summer, I helped organize a reading of nine of the writers at the Santa Fe Public Library. Our group was a mix of veterans and family members. Before the event, I read each writer's work and learned a little bit about their personal history. For over an hour on that day at the library, a small group of family, friends, and community members listened closely as each person read aloud.

What started out as a way for me to honor my dad's service by preserving a written record of it had turned into something more. While getting to know a few of the writers I gained an appreciation for the time and emotional effort that went into shaping their memories into poems and stories. I also saw how powerful it could be to share those words both in writing and out loud.

With Veterans Day approaching, instead of simply thanking a veteran or service member, perhaps we should consider sitting down with that grandfather or aunt or neighbor who served, and, maybe, when they are ready, they will share their story with us.

Holes in Our Hearts is available for purchase at local bookstores and can be checked out at all New Mexico public libraries. On Veterans Day, Nov. 11, I along with eight other writers will read from our work at the Placitas Community Library.

Paula Nixon is a freelance writer. She has lived and worked in Santa Fe for over 25 years.