

When Mr. Olson takes students to Washington, D.C., he wants his students to make meaningful and memorable connections. One such connection is with the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial. Mr. Olson has the names of soldiers who were born in Rock Island County and died serving their country in the Vietnam War. He then and has his group obtain name rubbings of these soldiers when they visit the Wall.

Lois Case, a teacher and tour moderator for John Deere Middle School, connected Mr. Olson with Ed Gaudet, a local veteran who served in Vietnam in 1965-66. Ed originally gave Mr. Olson a list of 48 names of local soldiers whose names would be on the Wall. In March of 2000, a group of about 50 students traveled to Washington, D.C. and diligently looked up and made rubbings of every name.

When the group returned, the Dispatch newspaper ran an article about the project and publicized the names on the rubbings. Many phone calls and letters came in requesting the rubbings. One phone call was from a family member of a soldier that was not on the list. This past fall, Mr. Olson found seven more names and realized this project was far from complete. Mr. Olson then became inspired to create a memorial for Wilson Middle School that would recognize and honor Rock Island County heroes whose names appeared on the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial Wall.

With the help of the Internet and the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial web page, Mr. Olson was able to get more information about each soldier such as age, race, gender, date of birth, hometown, religion, marital status, and a very brief military biography. He then put together a binder with this biographical information and included letters from family and friends of the fallen soldiers.

In February 2007, students traveling to Washington, D.C. once again obtained the rubbings of 55 names of Rock Island County heroes that would be a part of a new memorial at Woodrow Wilson Middle School. The idea was to have this memorial displayed at Wilson every Veteran's Day, Armed Forces Day, and Memorial Day. Mr. Olson shared his idea with Wilson art teacher, Tiffany Ramos who had previously served as a chaperone on one of Mr. Olson's Washington DC trips. Ms. Ramos' enthusiasm and creative abilities resulted in a wonderful design for the memorial. Combining Ms. Ramos' painting talents, and Mr. Olson's wood carving ability, a memorial was made. It is important to note that although the overall theme of the memorial surrounds the Vietnam Wall, the words on the memorial "Freedom isn't free!" and "Honoring those who serve" are meant for soldiers who are serving our country now or have served the United States in the past.