



Cleveland Kurtz

Interview and story by: **Daniel Paster**

This story is based on one of a series of interviews conducted by South Kingstown (RI) High School students in the Spring of 1998. All of the interviews were focused on recollections of the year 1968. In addition to the student's edited story below, you can find on this site the electronic transcript of the interview .

A Vietnam Vet Fights Racism

Cleveland Kurtz is a pleasant, well-spoken man of 54. He is a Vietnam veteran with a good sense of humor. He holds a Master's degree and works at a university. He lives in a two-family home he owns in Providence, Rhode Island .

FAMILY BACKGROUND

I was born in Central Florida in 1944 in the little town of Ovita which is located outside of Orlando. I lived there until moving to Providence when I was 14 or 15. I always liked to say that it was like one block away from slavery. My parents were migrant laborers, and we would go up North during the summertime and come back in September to go to school while my father worked in oranges and citrus. He was an orange picker for a while and then he worked in the packing plant. My mother worked in celery for a while and then she became a housekeeper. Ovita had little sections or neighborhoods and they were called quarters and the quarters were named after the original slave plantations.

Discrimination was present everywhere. Where I lived, every single thing was segregated, even the picture shows downtown. One of the first memories I have, before I could read, is sitting on the wrong bench. Some old white guy came and snatched me off it. Nothing in that town was more pervasive than segregation.

We were very much immersed in the Black churches there. My mother and my sisters were gospel singers and we sort of bounced around. I was born a Methodist, went from there to the Baptists, and from there to being Pentecostal as my mother sought higher meaning. I never learned to sing, by the way, which was always an embarrassment to me because everybody sang around me, but it was a rich and extraordinarily important part of my life.

Although I can't recall my father's political views and affiliations, my mother, Thelma Kurtz, was sort of in the vanguard. From the time that I can remember, she was involved in Civil Rights and that had an enormous impact on me. She was involved before it was fashionable, almost when it was a secret activity. She was always involved in civic affairs. She was the President of the PTA for years and that had a big impact on how I see things. My godfather was the principal of the primary school. The people who taught there gave us the best they could offer both in materials and in spirit too. They really pushed us -- they knew what we were up against and it was done with real devotion and sincerity, so I really lucked out.

In 1960, of course, I was only 14 or 15, so I wasn't yet interested in the Presidential election and who was running. However, after John F. Kennedy was elected, it started to kick in and I started to have some optimism. Like everybody else, I really liked him. He initiated the legal aspect of the Civil Rights movement and that always made him a kind of a hero of mine. Then, of course, Martin Luther King was probably the biggest role model that I've ever had and when he was assassinated that was a very difficult time. I found out about that in the evening, it was one of the saddest days of my life. It is very strange that Lyndon Johnson was the president who got the War really started and was responsible for my going to Vietnam, but he was also the most powerful Civil Rights president we ever had.

I went to Central High School in Providence where I studied auto mechanics. After high school, I went through the Browne and Sharpe apprenticeship program and became a journeyman machinist. At that time, I was doing very well for myself. I bought a home, I was in my early twenties. Life was just great, you know. Looking back, I think I was what they used to call a conspicuous consumer; I liked my toys and used to be a super sharp dresser. My experiences after being drafted changed my values with respect to that kind of stuff. I'm kind of more people-oriented now.

MILITARY SERVICE

I received my draft notice when I was in my early twenties, and at a high point in my life. In Rhode Island, once you got your draft notice you had until your date of induction to enlist. I went and looked to see where I could get the best deal, so I joined the Seabees. I thought that the United States Seabees didn't go to Vietnam. Within six months of my enlistment I was in Vietnam and I was one surprised dude. My base was Davisville, right in Rhode Island, but I was in a battalion and the whole battalion went to Chu Lai, Vietnam, which is central Vietnam. I was right on the shore, the south shore.

My departure was a sad time for my family; everybody knew what was going on in Vietnam from seeing it on television. I watched my mother, one time, watching the news about a veteran soldier who had gotten his legs shot off, and she just sobbed. It was also a very uncertain time, as I didn't know what I was about to face or anything like that.

In Vietnam, I went through 23 rocket attacks. You could not tell where the rockets or mortars were coming from so you couldn't tell where they were going to hit. All you could do was run for your bunker and hope it didn't hit your bunker. I lost some friends to the war before I went to Vietnam and I lost a whole helicopter full of [friends] when I was there. During one of the rocket attacks one of my friends was killed and he was maybe two hundred feet from me. Those two incidents were the most painful.

Personally, I was ambivalent about the war at first, but over time I came to believe it was not a good idea, an unfortunate decision by

this country. It's very strange, Lyndon Johnson was the president who got the war really started and was responsible for my going to Vietnam, but he was also the most powerful Civil Rights president we ever had. So you can understand how confused I am. I'll never get that straight.

I also thought the military tactics were pretty bad. We blew up the country we were trying to save. Tell me how smart that is! I'll never understand the purpose of the American military presence in Southeast Asia. There are many veterans who have very strong feelings about the rightness of that endeavor, but I could never hook up with that. I'm proud to be a veteran but I never figured out what we did there. Those people were the victims of our racism, and if you're trying to save people you don't look down on them.

That was another complicated issue, race. It's a funny thing in Vietnam, it went both ways. I've never in my life been in a place where there was more racial harmony and unity because guys actually got together and their souls flowed together, but then there were also the opposite extremes. There were segregated areas just like there were in the South when you couldn't walk through certain sections of town without being called dirty names, or something like that. So Vietnam was the same: there were certain places where the term blue-eyed soul brother meant that this guy is one of us, and then other places where the hostility was so thick you could touch it. It was a confusing time just knowing where you were supposed to be. You didn't know what the rules were--this area was all red-neck country and that area was for the souls and another was for the blue-eyed souls.

AFTER THE SERVICE

When I returned home, it was kind of traumatic. These weren't the days when you were welcomed as a hero upon your return, and when I came home I came home to nothing. All the things that I had accomplished when I was working were gone and so that was really disappointing. For a while I had to live with my mother again, until I got back on my feet, so I was an unhappy customer.

Veterans were degraded, absolutely degraded. Horrendous, horrendous was the way we were treated. Nobody should be treated that way. I think that many {white} veterans got a chance when they came back from 'Nam to feel how it felt to be black, because we were all treated that way, with hostility and indifference. It was a time when people who hadn't really been discriminated against or treated like pariahs, got a chance to be treated that way.

The way most veterans dealt with it was to hang out with other veterans after first arriving home. Outside of that I had little contact with people. I was a closet vet; I didn't really talk about it except with the vets who were close to me, so most of my friends were veterans.

Seeing Vietnam veterans in wheelchairs and on crutches broke my heart. I realized every disabled Vietnam veteran has had a horrible humiliating experience with the Veterans Administration and I knew what that was like. If you see a disabled Vietnam veteran you are also looking at a person who was degraded to the max by his experiences trying to get his disability treated or trying to get fair treatment. I have a powerful reaction to the fact that this dude not only got injured physically or emotionally in the war, when he came back the Veterans Administration tried to take him out too. The country I came back to had absolutely no concern for disabled Vietnam veterans; they were considered pains in the butt and were treated as such.

After more time passed, I was a member of Vietnam Veterans against the War, and I worked with one of the groups that spoke out about bringing the veterans home right. The reception was decidedly mixed. It was the days of the hawks and the doves, with nothing in between. Some people, mostly students, were so antiwar as to make me almost uncomfortable. Both the students and the hawks had hostility towards the soldiers themselves. The traditional groups that support veterans were also often very hostile to Vietnam veterans and I had a couple of bad experiences and never bothered with them again until recently.

I found student protests against the war and the draft, such as the Columbia University sit-in, rather puzzling. My gut feeling was that the people who didn't have to go because of deferments were protesting, and all those antiwar things were colored by the fact that the protesters didn't have to go. But they were the ones who made the most noise and anything anybody could do to get us back home was okay with me.

These days I am still in touch with a few people with whom I served. My closest friend when I went to Vietnam had lots of emotional problems when he came home and I ended up raising his son. He had two children. But one lived with me, and I was very close to the other. These are powerful connections; I still talk to him and see him now and then. I haven't kept in touch with as many veterans as I wanted to, and I think that this is now the time in my life where I would like to re-establish some of those relationships. One thing I do thought, is to visit the Vietnam war memorial. I go to the wall for a tune-up: it sort of helps me to keep my equilibrium so I go frequently.

When the War finally ended, I happened to be in Amsterdam, Holland. That was pretty traumatic in a different way. The folks there were anti-American in the sense of our involvement in the war, and so they celebrated many of the triumphs of the Communists. That was painful because nobody should celebrate the triumph of communism, you know? The Vietnam War started out as a civil war, and it should probably have stayed that way. By the way, the Vietnamese are extraordinary people. I grew to really admire them. I came to realize that they were going to be subjected to that kind of tyranny, and that many [Vietnamese] people I knew, friends and acquaintances, were gonna get screwed by the North Vietnamese. That didn't turn me on in the least. They went from one thing that was ugly to something else that was ugly, so it was very painful for me.

COLLEGE PERIOD

When I eventually resumed my education after military service, I attended Brown University, where I took creative writing and earned my Bachelor's and Master's degrees. I had applied to college when [I was] in Chu Lai. After serving in Vietnam, I had been reassigned to Cuba and I received my acceptance letter there.

I went to college right at the time where the colleges started making an effort to diversify. Unlike before, the campus had a significant number of blacks and Hispanics. As it happened, fatigues were popular on campus so that's what I wore, the same thing I wore in Vietnam, straight through college with my little Kurtz name tag on my shirt and on the back pocket of my pants.

[College] was a wonderful time for me. In addition to all my studies, I participated in some political groups on campus. I was involved with the NAACP. I was involved with a group of young people who were a part of the Urban League. We were the ones who first got the governor to declare a national Black History Week in Rhode Island. I was also involved with a group called the National Conference of Christians and Jews, the section which focused on bringing people of different races and religions together for dialogue, and that was an extraordinary experience for me.

When I was at Brown, I was very much involved as manager in the Rites and Reason Theater, which was the major black cultural activity during that period. It had a big focus on theatre, performing arts and visual arts. Brown was the finest time in my life because of that.

After college I worked in the theatre for awhile, then for the Rhode Island Council on the Arts, and then for the prison in the arts program. Both these last two experiences were altogether wonderful.

CIVIL RIGHTS AND POLITICAL ACTIVITY

Now I am a member of the Vietnam Veterans of America and I also am part of a group called Operation Stand Down that works for homeless veterans.

I think that nothing determines a person's life in this country more than race, except for gender. When I was growing up, it was extraordinarily important that Black Americans stayed in a position that humiliated them. Like in Rhode Island, god, it was awful. I mean, it's ten times better now but then it was unbelievably backwards. It was nearly as bad as living in the South. All jobs that were good jobs were off limits and there were only certain sections of the community that you could live in. Jobs like policeman or fireman, no way. If you wanted to be a fireman, that was just a fantasy. So nothing determines anything more so than race. We were expected to do menial jobs all the time. There were tons of jewelry factories around here and all the Blacks that I knew worked in those jewelry factories.

I think that discrimination against women was also a big problem, the same as it is today. It was probably different from racism but women when I grew up were expected to do the jobs like secretaries and file clerks and things like that. They were not expected to go out and be doctors and lawyers or administrators and that was the same with Blacks.

I think that racism is still a problem in American society. Big time. Next to sexism it's still the most destructive force in the country. Nothing will determine what my life is more than racism.