

A Last Hurrah

BY BERNIE EDELMAN

Tammany Hall boss George Washington Plunkitt once wrote: “I seen my opportunities and I took ’em.” At the end of 2005, a restaurant in the Capital Hilton left in a huff, charging the hotel with being anti-veteran. Representatives from the Washington, D.C., hotel asked to meet with veterans service organizations to tell their side of the story. This presented VVA with an opportunity, and we took it.

I met with the Hilton’s director of food and beverage, Eric Kodrowski, and we worked out an arrangement: A dinner would be held one Wednesday a month for patients at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. VVA would sensitize hotel staff to interacting with the wounded, especially those in wheelchairs and those missing limbs, and deliver the troops—and family members—to the hotel. The Hilton would provide food and drink, as well as wait staff gratuities. The Maryland and Virginia State Councils, Northern Virginia Chapter 227, Silver Spring, Maryland, Chapter 641, and members of VET-Force provided support.

The first dinner was held in January 2005. The Pledge of Allegiance was followed by a moment of silence for those lost in war, those healing from their wounds, and their families.

After General Manager Brian Kelleher’s welcome, everyone introduced themselves, giving their names, home towns, and the units they’d served with. Rick Weidman was the MC. Then dinner was served and conversation ebbed. We heard the clinking of glasses and laughter—lots of laughter—and we knew dinner was a success. The evening ended with everyone being given the opportunity to speak. Then gift bags were handed out to the troops.

All told, VVA and the Capital Hilton hosted 130 dinners. We avoided the media; the only publicity was word of mouth. The dinners succeeded because we kept coming back, month after month. So did some of the troops, who managed to attend four, six, or eight dinners before moving on.

The dinners succeeded because of the dedication and joy of the Capital Hilton staff—servers and chefs and folks like Madeleine Wolfgramm, the restaurant manager, daughter of a Green Beret captain who served in Vietnam.

And Sandy Halman, Walter Reed’s events coordinator, who gave us the okay for more dinners—and attended most of them.

And Wayne Gatewood, who after two decades in the Corps developed a thriving business—and other members of VET-Force.

And Bob Brudno, a Navy vet whose aviator brother, Alan, took his life four months after having been repatriated after seven and a half years in North Vietnamese prison camps.

And KC Cromwell, who spent twenty years in uniform, most in Special Forces—a woodworker who brought cutting boards to raffle to the troops.

And legislators like Tim Walz, Mike Michaud, Dick Blumenthal, and Steve Buyer, along with key personnel from both houses of Congress and the White House. And VA Secretary David Shulkin.

Each dinner was its own reward. VVA members and staff may have benefited even more than the wounded warriors, because they brought home, often in deeply personal terms, with laughter and in tears, the continuing cost of war. ■

Bernie Edelman is VVA’s deputy director of policy and government affairs.

