

Frank Romeo '67

Frank Romeo is a lifelong resident of Bay Shore and still very active in community affairs. While enjoying his teenage years at Bay Shore High School he was active in student government and athletics and was once scouted by a Major League Baseball team. Frank graduated in 1967 at the height of ground fighting during the Vietnam War. With the likelihood of being drafted Frank, like many other Bay Shore students, joined the military after graduation to fight for their country.

Due to his physical gifts Frank was assigned to the 199th Light Infantry Brigade a small elite unit designed for search and destroy covert missions. This specialty unit existed for only four years and was the prototype of today's most elite fighting forces. Living and fighting in heavy jungle Frank lived and worked in enemy held territory while performing daily missions to locate and destroy enemy base camps. While on a covert mission into Cambodia he was separated from his unit and pinned down by the enemy. Frank held off an enemy attack alone but was critically wounded and sustained seven gunshot wounds. Left for dead by the enemy he woke up a month later in Japan and began the arduous task of healing. Upon returning home he spent the next year in recovery and began showing signs of what would later be known as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD.

Living with the devastating effects of PTSD Frank battled his condition for the next two decades finding it impossible to put his life on track. During a crisis Frank had an epiphany and discovered art as a means of dealing with his trauma and began to paint incessantly about trauma and about the war. As a condition of PTSD his stories were too painful to share so he hid his artwork away never to see the light of day. In the 1980's his art was discovered and took on a life of its own while the news media dubbed Frank the first "Closet Artist" of Vietnam. He began to search out other veterans with the same condition that also used art as a means of healing. He found the subject matter to always be the same, trauma and the war experience. Frank began collecting art created by other veterans as a cathartic experience and put together an impressive collection.

It was then that he realized what he had done! Not only was he documenting American history through art but he was documenting the

emotional history of our country. He was documenting the story of PTSD from its inception to its use today. This was the beginning of a new life for Frank, a life of awareness and teaching. Frank felt the need to share his new discovery and began to show his collection of trauma art and talk about PTSD, its diagnosis, and its treatment. Frank travelled the country with his art collection talking to anyone that would listen. Many times he slept in his van alongside the artwork due to lack of funds just to get his message out.

Frank developed “THE ART OF WAR” educational programs for students as a living history experience combining hands-on art exhibits coupled with PTSD and trauma-focused workshops followed by lectures. For the next thirty years, “THE ART OF WAR” travelled throughout the country and touched tens of thousands of lives in a spirit of education and healing. Frank believes that education before the fact will lessen the burden of social issues we face afterwards.

Frank felt if he was going to educate about the realities of war and the devastating effects of PTSD he needed to travel back to the inception of his trauma. To heighten the learning experience, Frank travelled back to Southeast Asia in his senior years. Once again he lived in the jungles and the rice paddies in grass huts comparing his experiences then and the present. He met the former enemy and studied PTSD from their perspective and wrote an online daily blog while students in America followed him as a lesson plan. Frank made history as he held lesson plans from former battle zones via Skype from the jungles of Southeast Asia right into the classrooms of America in real time.

His innovative learning programs continue to inspire and give hope to many with his program Walk With Frank. To shed light on veteran issues and enhance the learning experience, Frank walked 800 miles across New York State while living in homeless shelters and eating in soup kitchens. Documenting the lives of homeless veterans suffering with PTSD he once again wrote a daily Blog for students to follow while always allowing for questions. His findings are put together in an educational documentary film in hopes to better understand PTSD and how to better serve those who suffer.

Making history once again Frank, in conjunction with Bay Shore School District, created a first of its kind curriculum in America. “The Experience of

the American Soldier” is based on Frank’s teachings and was piloted by Bay Shore School District in all 11th grade Social Studies, American History, and Government classes in 2018. Now students will not only study the war, a battle, or policy but they will study the soldier and the veteran throughout history. Frank believes this will instill a sense of sacrifice and country in students and will impact all future veterans.

Frank has received numerous accolades for his work including the United States Congress, the Australian government, and New York City's Mayor's Office as well as state and local governments. Frank continues to lead the way in reality based educational programs that touch social issues and the hearts and minds of the American people.