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War Comes Home

California Reads' event features a must-see film, a must-read book

By Laurie Snyder



From Nov. 28 to Dec. 3, 1950, members of the United States Marine Corps' 5th and 7th regiments fought through twice their number of Communist Chinese forces for 15 miles to Hagaru-ri on the southern tip of Korea's Chosin Reservoir, where they regrouped for an even more heroic 40-mile fight down mountain trails to the sea. A significant number of the exhausted Marines like those shown in this Nov. 29 photo lost fingers, hands or feet to severe frostbite. Many also still suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Source: United States Marine Corps History Division

They are our dads, our uncles, our grandpas, our sisters, our neighbors. Quiet, reserved men and women tossing off occasional references to time spent in the Army, Navy or Marines. No big deal. They went off to war, did their duty and returned home to start careers and families. A shoulder shrug usually ends the conversation, leaving Lamorindans realizing decades later that they never learned the details of what happened to friends and family at Normandy, Chosin, Khe Sanh, or Fallujah – and how they survived.

Soldiers have kept to themselves since first suffering Soldiers' Heart at Antietam during the Civil War. But now, they need no longer agonize in silence and anonymity. Thanks to 2014's blockbuster California Reads event, Lamorindans are being given an unprecedented chance to have the critical conver-

sations they need to have with loved ones before they pass on, taking their untold stories with them.

The program kicks off in Lamorinda at 6:30 p.m. on Wednesday, Nov. 12 at the Orinda Theatre when the library presents "Chosin," the acclaimed documentary which chronicles the courage of "the Chosin few" – the vastly outnumbered men who helped stop Communist Chinese forces from capturing South Korea while saving 100,000 Korean refugees. An unflinching look at the heartbreaking suffering and incredible heroism of a bunch of regular Joes, the film is guaranteed to spark dialogue between those who have only read about the Korean War and those who lived it.

Then on Tuesday, Dec. 2, Lamorindans will hear from Purple Heart and dual Bronze Star recipi-

ent, Luis Carlos Montalván, the former U.S. Army captain who has been educating the nation about the life-changing healing that has been happening to veterans when paired with service dogs. He appeared on the Late Show with David Letterman in 2011 to discuss his book, "Until Tuesday: A Wounded Warrior and the Golden Retriever Who Saved Him," a New York Times bestseller. Telling Letterman that it can take as much as \$25,000 to train just one service dog, he observed that his own dog, Tuesday, "brightens my days and calms my nights." Montalván developed post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after suffering a traumatic brain injury (TBI) and being stabbed while on duty at a U.S. Army outpost in Al-Waleed, Iraq – 300 miles from Baghdad and a lifetime away from the comforts of home.

The event with Montalván, which is not suitable for children under the age of 13, will begin at 7 p.m. at the Lafayette Library Community Hall, and is being presented in partnership with Cal Humanities and the California Center for the Book. It is supported in part by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the U.S. Institute of Museum and Library Services.

Lamorindans privileged to catch the screening or lecture will never look at the American flag the same way again. Copies of "Until Tuesday" are available at the Orinda, Lafayette and Moraga libraries. For more information about War Comes Home and its related events, contact your local librarian.

America's National Day of Listening (<http://diy.storycorps.org/>) is Nov. 28; sit down with your family, friends and neighbors and start recording their stories. Your great-great-grandchildren will thank you.

Threshold Choir: Voices of Angels

By Diane Claytor



Diablo Valley Choir members

Photo Diane Claytor

Whether or not you believe angels exist, one thing is clear after meeting Orinda's Leah Fisher. She's as close to an angel on earth as one could be. The soft spoken, soon-to-be first-time grandmother has a hearty laugh and a warm, generous spirit. Fisher has two great passions in her life: her family and the Threshold Choir, which, according to their website, "brings ease and comfort to those at the threshold of living and dying ... with gentle voices and sincere kindness." Fisher says that "this is one of the most meaningful things I do."

The Threshold Choir was founded in 2000 by Marin County resident, Kate Munger, who, while sitting with a dying friend, began singing to him as a way of managing her own fear. She quickly discovered the music appeared to comfort both of them. Today there are more than 100 Threshold Choir chapters throughout the country, offering calming music with compassion and sensitivity to people facing death.

Fisher says that being a member of the choir "makes me happy to be alive." She joined the group 14 years ago when, with her children gone and her father dying, she was "suffering spiritually, facing losses that are a natural part of life," she explains. "I find that singing with the choir takes me to

a place where I know all is well. That's part of the gift we give to the people we sing to ... we convey the message that all is well."

Fisher belongs to the all-women Diablo Valley Choir. Typically two to four women will sing a cappella to a patient. "I love the sisterhood and intimacy of blending my voice with other women," Fisher says. "There is something quite precious knowing that we are giving this gift to people who are experiencing this transition." She described instances of singing to someone who appears to be non-responsive. "When we choose our songs well and sing one with very few words, almost like a chant, we'll often see a shift in breathing, we'll see little bits of motion in the muscles around the mouth; it's very clear that we are being heard."

"We once sang for a woman who had been in Sweet Adelines for 50 years," Fisher continues. "She couldn't speak but she was soon directing us with her hands. I'm so moved by that type of experience, by knowing that what we're giving is a gift that is being received."

The 30-member Diablo Valley Choir is invited to sing at hospitals, hospice, nursing facilities and home care, as well as at Services of Remembrance. There are few re-

quirements for choir singers, according to Fisher, and they're always looking for new members. "They should be able to carry a tune, gently blend with other voices and be drawn to the work." There is an orientation period where members learn not only the music but how it feels to be at a bedside with someone at the end of life. Rehearsals are generally twice a month and help singers practice blending voices and become totally familiar with the songs, many of which are written by choir members. Songs range from those that are about celebrating life, about resting, about breathing easily and about letting go. "It is so not about performance," Fisher states. "It's really about connection and love. We are giving an individual gift to each recipient."

Fisher, a retired psychotherapist, says the choir has been such a treasured part of her "older woman years." She has been thinking a lot about what's important in her life right now and concludes that it's "intimacy, community and purpose. Finding all three in one place in this culture with its warp speed is not an easy thing to do. And I get all three from this choir."

For additional information on the *Diablo Valley Choir*, please email diablovalley@thresholdchoir.org.