

JERRY DONNELLAN

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The “Barn Playhouse” at the original, small Rockland Community College campus in Viola, N.Y., was left over from the self-sufficiency days of the county Almshouse, the home for the aged and the poor and the near-infirm. In 1966, it had become the center for theatre arts run by the talented James Naismith. It was also where I first met Jerry Donnellan, the late director of veterans services, a properly revered man for all his accomplishment.

As a Journal-News photographer assigned to take a publicity shot for an upcoming production, Naismith brought me to a small table with a 40-watt bulb barely lighting the script. The barn itself had little illumination, and focusing my camera was difficult, but the student at the table made it easy, quickly helping me set up a shot that told the story. He was Jerry Donnellan, son of two native Irish and even then full of wit.

Not long after that assignment, Jerry would be drafted, and his biggest production would begin, this time on the stage of life.

In October 1969, Jerry was shot and hit with a grenade in Vietnam’s central highlands, leaving him barely alive, without his right leg and full of shrapnel. A long rehabilitation followed, then an amazing career as a stage manager for Frank Sinatra.

In the later 1980s, about 20 years after I took Jerry’s photograph at RCC, he, the newspaper and I would meet again when he walked into the West Nyack newsroom, asked for the Editorial Page editor and sat down with me.

Jerry had helped organize the Rockland Chapter of the Vietnam Veterans of America and was wondering if The Journal-News could assist in getting the word out. So, again, Jerry and I were meeting for publicity purposes, neither of us recalling the 1966 photo assignment.

The later 1980s was the beginning of a more educated look back at Vietnam, that unnecessary war driven by government that hid the facts and the need. The unpopular conflict brought protests and confused the warrior with the war. Returning military were spat upon, and for years Vietnam veterans did not get their due, as World War II vets had. Jerry was determined to change that, and fortunately, Rockland government, especially C. Scott Vanderhoef, the former county executive, saw Jerry’s potential and agreed to help. The newspaper assisted, too, especially through the efforts of Paul Janensch, then executive editor. Stories

and editorials were written. Jerry was named Rockland veterans affairs director, and in that long-serving role he created innovative programs copied across the nation, such as veterans' clinics.

But Jerry Donnellan's most significant achievement was in sharing his soul with his fellow vets, from all wars, all eras. That was his mission, and he knew it. The day Jerry was so severely wounded, with a lifetime of pain and night sweats ahead, the gods signed him to an enlistment he could never quit until he passed away and saw his old dad again, and his buddies.

He was among those who survived, this Jerry Donnellan, this not-sold on the Vietnam War, average RCC student with admitted warts. He lived, though he thought he would die. For that, he somehow knew there would be payback, and though Jerry spent many working years in the Sinatra days and nights, the gods finally rang the bell and said, "Jerry, time to make the doughnuts. Organize those loosely set, long-disrespected Vietnam-era brothers and sisters and help them stand tall, as they deserve to do."

It was not their fault that a country reeling from JFK's lost youth initiative and disillusioned by a military that did not have Ike's understanding of war would spit at the citizen soldier who turned up at the Whitehall Street induction center and elsewhere, did his job and maybe came home. It was Jerry's time, when he rallied those vets, and then the gift of organization became evident and he was given the county job. It was his mission, his reason for being. Hell, maybe he was wounded and maybe he survived so he could do the job.

The gods are proud of him. Anyone who ever knew Jerry Donnellan is proud, even those you argued with him. His mojo happened.

RIP, sir. Your service has been fulfilled. May your soul be at God's right hand, Irishman.

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