

Red Cross volunteers share Vietnam War stories

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Inland Valley Voice

CLAREMONT — When Sharon Cummings was 21 and fresh out of college, she volunteered to go to Vietnam as a Red Cross "Donut Dollie," eager to serve her country for one year by acting as a hostess of sorts, providing a willing ear and activity books for soldiers.

"You had to be up and smiling the whole time no matter what you were feeling inside," she said. "Our main reason was to give those guys a break from the war for an hour or two."

She went in search of service and a great adventure in an exotic land. After all, her father, an Air Force veteran of World War II, was confident the government would never send her or the other women volunteers anywhere they could be hurt.

"He didn't realize Vietnam was not a place with front lines," Cummings said.

By the time her tour of duty was over in the spring of 1967, Cummings was "emotionally drained" and physically exhausted. She felt lost, but was unable to stop smiling. She was furious that it seemed people didn't realize young men were dying in jungles far away.

Cummings, a Canyon Country resident who works for a Pasadena engineering and design firm, is one of two Red Cross Vi-

FYI

• **What:** "A Piece of My Heart," a play about six women who served in Vietnam; two Red Cross "Donut Dollie" volunteers will speak after the 2 p.m. performance Saturday
• **When:** 2 p.m. and 8 p.m. Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday
• **Where:** Allen Studio Theater of the Seaver Theater Complex, Pomona College, 300 E. Bonita Ave., Claremont
• **Cost:** \$10, \$5 for seniors and Claremont Colleges students, faculty and staff
• **For more information:** 621-8525 or 607-4375

etnam volunteers who will share their stories Saturday after the Pomona College theater department's performance of "A Piece of My Heart," the story of six women who worked in the war zones of Vietnam.

Cummings, who will be joined by Linnie Stone, will speak after the 2 p.m. performance.

Cummings said she didn't realize others shared her experience nor how important her work was to the soldiers until about a decade ago, when the memorial to women in Vietnam was dedicated in Washington. That got a lot of the volunteers and nurses, whom she refers to as "the real heroes," in touch with each other.

Talking about her experience is important, Cummings said,

particularly when it comes to students.

"I think oral history is important. It makes it more alive," she said. "I remember when I was their age World War II was ancient history to me. I knew my dad was in the war, but that was in parts of [school] books we never got to. To know that Vietnam holds that same status to young people today appalls me."

Cummings and Stone worked with the cast at Pomona College, answering their questions and explaining what life was like to the young actors.

"They're really wonderful women. They brought their scrapbooks and uniforms and brought videos and told stories and it was really very heartwarming and heartbreaking and really informative to us," theater professor Betty Bernhard said. "It gives a level of depth and authenticity to the production, to the acting."

It's not the first time Cummings has worked with actors portraying the Vietnam era. She served as a consultant to the



Sharon Cummings



Sharon Cummings, bottom row center, was part of an informal group of Red Cross woman and soldiers who played folk songs and developed into "The Sandpipers," which toured and performed for military units and at a convalescent hospital.

television show "China Beach," working individually with actress and talk show host Ricki Lake, who played a Donut Dollie.

Pomona's actors, like others, want to know the everyday details of life as a volunteer. What was the dating scene, if there was one? What was it like to rotate out of a place every three months and leave new friends behind? How did they interact with the nurses, and what was it

like to find out a befriended soldier was killed? What was it like to be under fire?

Cummings said there's one story that always gets the female actors laughing.

"When you go over you had to make sure you have plenty of tampons," Cummings said. "And then later when they got them into the PX we had to fight the guys for them because they were the perfect thing to clean rifles!"