

March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2003

Dr. Betty Bernhard  
Dept. of Theatre & Dance  
Pomona College  
300 East Bonita Ave.  
Claremont, CA 91711

RE: "*A Piece of My Heart*"

Dear Dr. Bernhard:

I would like to thank you and the cast for all of your hard work in producing "*A Piece of My Heart*." I attended the Saturday afternoon presentation and was very moved by the performances given by each member of the cast. As a Vietnam Veteran, the thing that immediately captured me was the similarity between the ages of your cast members and the young men (including myself) that I served with in Vietnam.

When I noticed the announcement of the play in "*Valley Voice, LA Times*," I was drawn to notice two things; the headline – "*Red Cross Volunteers Share Vietnam War Stories*," and the fact that this is a college play. My daughter, who attends Emory University, happens to have been performing in "*The Laramie Project*" right at the same time as your play. Not being able to fly back to the East Coast to see her this past weekend, I thought attending your play might be a good alternative. Well, your cast did a magnificent job and I congratulate them all. I was really struck by one young woman in the play who looks a lot like my own daughter.

The play had quite an impact. Indeed, at intermission, I left. About the time I drove past Pitzer College I decided better of it and so I returned. The fact is, I was quietly crying all the way through the first act. The cast simply did too good a job of portraying the innocence experienced by all of us who had to go to Vietnam. Every line, every mannerism, every gesture struck me as too real. I was breaking up inside. But despite that, I returned for the second act. Again, very realistic. I sat there remembering my own experiences over the past 35 years.

After returning home from the war in 1968, it really killed me to watch the news at night and see the reports on Vietnam. It was like watching an on-going nightmare that had no end. Yes, I did some drinking, but I still managed to finish a degree and get a job. In fact, I even earned an MA. But it was not easy. Again, your cast delivered on the emotion and the truth of what so many of us went through – gals *and* guys! You know, I once was unemployed for six months when I got out of college. Finally, I removed from my resume any reference to military experience and immediately got six job interviews. It is hard for people to believe it today, but Vietnam Vets really were considered outcasts.

I remember being interviewed for a job in city planning. I was asked, "Can you read a topographical map?" Well, I said "yes!" How well, asked the interviewer? "Good enough to call a battery of 105's right on top of the enemy position." I actually got the job. The guy doing the interview was a Korean War vet. Got lucky I guess.

After the play, I wanted to get up and say something to the Donut Dollies – but I knew that if I did I would completely breakdown. But, if I had been able to do so, it would have been something like this:

On Christmas Day, 1967, I had dinner with two Donut Dollies. It was an important thing to me and my squad to be so honored by the presence of those two young women from back home. Here is why –

In August of 1967, I survived the **Battle of LZ Pat** in the Song Rae Valley. Out of 128 men in the company who were landed in that LZ – only 66 of us survived the day. All the rest were either killed or wounded as a result of faulty military intelligence – we were landed in the middle of a North Vietnamese Army unit four times our size.

In September, we were in **Operation Pershing** on the Bong Son Plains. No big battles – just booby traps, snipers and small unit ambushes in the black of night. In the period of 45 days, we took about 20 casualties.

In October I was promoted to sergeant and given charge of second squad.

In November of 1967 came the **Battle of Dak To**. My eleven man squad was landed with the rest of our company in another LZ. This time it was in the Central Highlands, we were right up against the border of Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. Fifteen minutes after jumping off of the helicopter, we were in the fight of our lives. Another big NVA force was waiting for us. Imagine, at 7 am there were 117 men in Company B and 2<sup>nd</sup> squad had 11 of those men. By 7:20 am, there were 70 men in Company B and 2<sup>nd</sup> squad had four men left. The battle raged for three days. The entire battalion (2<sup>nd</sup> of the 8<sup>th</sup>) had to be flown in to reinforce us. They called it a victory.

In December I got a few replacements just in time for the **Battle of Tam Quan** on the Bong Son Plains. We were in a ten day fight against a large NVA regiment. Second Squad lost two men out of the seven on hand when the battle started.

On Christmas Day, our platoon was sent out on patrol early in the morning to make sure that the NVA and VC were not setting up mortars or rockets near the LZ. The guys were anxious because they feared missing the “Big Dinner” being flown out to our LZ. We got back into the wire around 2pm and – with combat gear still hanging off our bodies – we raced to get into the chow line for dinner. I was the last man through the chow line. I felt as though my eyes were deceiving me as I observed two Donut Dollies standing there serving Christmas dinner. I was so surprised I couldn’t speak. I remember how they looked at me as if to wonder, “How are deaf mutes being allowed into the Army?”

My squad sat on some boulders and to our surprise the two Donut Dollies came to join us. They had their trays filled with Christmas dinner and we were sure surprised. The shock having worn off, I could finally talk. The first thing I did was warn the squad to “watch your language!” After eating and visiting, the gals told us that they had two hours before their scheduled pick up was to arrive. A Captain came over to ask the ladies to join the officers in their tent. As they were thanking him for the invite, I mentioned that we had two man bunkers all around the perimeter of the LZ and those guys weren’t able to see the “gals from home.” Both of the Donut Dollies asked if I and my squad could help them visit the rest of the men. I remarked that they would miss the officer’s mess – but they said they came to see the “guys.”

Well, we were on a large enough LZ as to have a jeep – which I decided to heist in order to give the gals a tour of the perimeter. I am sure the Sgt Major didn’t really miss it.

So, the five of us that made up what was left of 2<sup>nd</sup> squad boarded the jeep with the gals and we took them to each bunker on the perimeter so they could say “Merry Christmas” to each of the guys. It took nearly all the two hours they had by the time we finished. But each G.I. guarding the perimeter of the LZ did get a chance to see the gals and say “Merry Christmas” right back. It was great – a really great day.

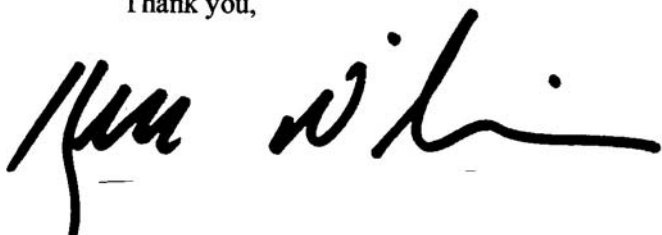
We saw the gals off at the helicopter pad and waved good-bye. They were great, really could cut up and be funny and feminine. Something we all missed.

Five weeks after that, our company was **flown into battle at Quang Tri** – it was the **big Tet Offensive of 1968**. Of the five of us who shared Christmas Dinner with those two Donut Dollies – two would not make it past Tet. A third would die in the **A Shau Valley** a few months later. For three of my buddies, Christmas Dinner in ’67 was their last. At least they got to share it with a couple of very special gals whose names I cannot remember. But every Christmas, I remember them and I privately thank them for those very special memories.

A post script: My tour of duty ended in May of 1968. I left a fox hole in the A Shau Valley and in one week I was in my mother's living room. I could still hear helicopters, rifle and shell fire in my head. I could not close my eyes without seeing everything I had left behind. A few days after arriving home I was watching the California Presidential Primary election results on T.V. I listened to Robert Kennedy's victory speech at the Ambassador Hotel and then he was suddenly killed.

I think it took courage as well as talent for you and your young cast to reach out and tackle this play. Over the past 35 years since Vietnam I have found refuge in theatre, the arts and music. We all need to find places for solace and understanding. With that in mind, I pray you and your cast continue to offer your talent and commitment to humanity long into the future.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ron Wilk". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.