

VFW POST 4393: AN AMERICAN THIRD PLACE

The VFW stands for the Veterans of Foreign Wars. It traces its roots back to 1899 when veterans of the Spanish-American War, and the Philippine Insurrection founded local organizations to secure rights and benefits due to their service-many came home wounded and had no medical care, or veterans' pension. The first VFW chapters were formed in Colorado, Ohio and Pennsylvania and by 1936 membership grew throughout the United States, with over 200,000 members. Today, membership includes U.S. citizens, who are veterans from four wars and active-duty service members who have been involved in expeditionary campaigns. Membership is open to all U.S. service members who have either earned an overseas campaign or expeditionary medal, are currently on active-duty or in the Reserves, or who have been honorably discharged from the U.S. armed forces.

While from the outside looking in, one may assume the VFW acts only as a watering hole for vets, there is actually a great deal of community service and involvement along side the Red Cross, USO, and the Salvation Army. Most recently the VFW has partnered with America's Promise and the Points of Light Foundation. Here in Northfield, the VFW sponsors a variety of youth sports. They also contribute to Special Olympics, and recently sponsored the Fire Departments' purchase of a new state-of-the-art fire truck.

In addition to helping the community, the VFW also helps its members. The veteran's services division assists vets seeking help on a variety of levels, from medical help, employment, and entitlements. There are lobbyists in Washington, DC that lobby to keep the needs and voices of veterans. The services division assists vets seeking help on a variety of levels, from medical help, employment, and entitlements. There are lobbyists in Washington, DC that lobby to keep the needs and voices of veterans.

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the community that is maintained and created at the Northfield, Minnesota Post VFW 4393. This paper specifically focuses on the community, which is created for veterans of foreign wars, and the changing face of this popular hangout. Subjects interviewed were primarily veterans who served in a foreign war, and who frequent the VFW. The purpose of this research was to define and rate the level of community that the VFW creates, and its changing face as its target market decreases. This analysis will provide insight into the theory of "third place." The idea that there is a third place-outside of home and work, where people frequent, was the focus of my research. I chose the VFW due to its specific membership and the clientele it

attracts. The history and change of the VFW is unlike nearly any other bar or restaurant, and it was my goal to see how current patrons of the VFW feel towards this. This paper advances the idea that there is a common third place for veterans.

THE SETTING/COMMUNITY

Post 4393 VFW is nestled in downtown Northfield, Minnesota. Northfield is a quaint college city just 35 miles south of Minneapolis. There are two colleges in Northfield, St. Olaf College, a liberal arts college with a Lutheran/Norwegian background, and Carleton, a liberal arts college, which has less of a religious/cultural background than St. Olaf. The population of Northfield is around 15,000 residents. The majority of people living in Northfield are either employed by one of the colleges, Malt-O-Meal (a cereal company), or in the Twin Cities. The Northfield downtown is one of few remaining in America, where there is a true plethora of shops, services, and restaurants. Located at 518 Division Street, next to an auto parts store, and ard.

Finally, the Ladies Auxiliary was founded in 1914 to help veterans and their families, and is the backbone of the VFW's volunteer efforts. These ladies are the sellers of the popular "Red Poppy" frequently sold at supermarkets.

While there are many outside activities in which the VFW is active, the one I was most interested in was the activity inside the community that is created on bar stools, between Miller Lights, and old war stories. On an average day, there are 50 people that go to the Northfield VFW, more on Friday and Saturday nights. The average VFW patron is around 58, male and a Vietnam Vet. There are about 15-20 regulars who come in everyday. There are six bartenders. There are a total of 264 members at Post 4393, up from 251 in 2001. Eleven new memberships were bought in 2001. There are 162 Lifetime members. The price of a lifetime membership is \$115. The Northfield VFW does not serve food on a regular basis, however it does hold fish fries on Friday nights during lent, and an occasional steak fry throughout the year. The main revenue comes in through alcohol sales, which pays to keep-up the VFW and pay its staff, while the pull-tab lottery is used for community giving. The overall setting at the VFW is light-hearted, many people clearly enjoying their beverages.

PROBLEM

Ray Oldenburg's book, *The Great Good Place*, identifies the importance of places in which community may occur away from home. He discuss the idea of third place theory, a concept which states that there is a place, separate from home and work where people go to gather and "hang out." He identifies eight key concepts which make up a third place:

1. A place which is on neutral ground. The persons who attend a certain place

must not get into uncomfortable tangles with each other; they must remain jovial in friendship.

2. The third place is a leveler. All persons are equal; most differences are left at the door, and similarities are the precedent. Things that restrict people from interacting elsewhere are diminished. Status is not important, personality and camaraderie are.

3. Conversation is the main activity. Lively, engaging conversation is constant, and a priority.

4. Accessibility and Accommodation. Location, and hours of operation are key to the success of third places, and allow for consistent community to occur. Also, prices, capacity, parking, amenities are important.

5. The Regulars. People who frequent the third place make it what it is. Knowing there will be familiar company give third place its characteristic feel. Furthermore, most regulars start as lone strangers, and are brought into the circle of the third place by a regular.

6. A Low Profile. The third place's building is generally in a physically plain building. There is little elegance, and the building is rather modest looking. They are also generally taken for granted.

7. The mood is playful. Serious conversation does not usually last longer than 60 seconds. Fun and acceptance are more important than anxiety and stress. People stay longer than intended because they are enjoying themselves, and don't want to leave.

8. A Home Away From Home. The third place is a congenial environment much like home. The same level of psychological comfort which is found in the private home, is found in the public home. Furthermore, there are specific physical characteristics much like home, such as a favorite chair.

THE VFW

The VFW was initially organized by veterans, for veterans. However, as the numbers of veteran's decrease, VFW membership continues to go down, therefore creating closings of many VFW's, and therefore a loss of community for those few veterans who continue to utilize the services the VFW provides. I was interested in the idea of "Third Place Theory" and the meaning it held within the walls of the Northfield VFW. Unlike other third places, the VFW has a concrete audience, one that is bonded by hardship, struggle and history, but also a continuation of the community they gained while fighting in war. The desire I had to draw the connection of third place theory and the Northfield VFW was to see the difference between the average bar, restaurant, hangout, and one where there is a specific clientele attracted-one which has such a patriotic American crowd. Since returning from abroad myself, I have seen a need for persons with similar experiences abroad to congregate and

communicate on their common bond.

The VFW has had a waning membership since the early 1970's. Vietnam Veterans felt a large amount of shame and guilt after returning in the 70's, unlike World War I and II veterans, who were welcomed back with open arms and thanks by all Americans. The numbers of World War I and II veterans that joined the VFW were significantly larger than those who were Vietnam vets. The changing faces of the VFW-and that of all small town community bars, social clubs, and hang outs, is directly related to third place theory. The community-the third place-which is created, maintained and then lost when VFW's shut down, is very beneficial to the regular patrons. The physical existence of their hangout is not only gone, but more importantly the informal meeting place where veterans gathered, simply to hang out and be in similar company and potential conversation. The suburban archetype, which has become the norm since WWII, has allowed for hundreds of VFW's to shut down. The VFW can be seen as a focal point from which politics, history, family, and religion can be discussed. With this loss of social discussion, the heart of the American patriot experience is at stake.

An area of particular interest to me the fact that we are at war now, and there is a potential for new VFW membership was an area of constant discussion in doing my research. The problem of continuing membership was active in all my discussions. It is evident that many members of the VFW are concerned with the decline in membership-and the confusion as to its future. Veterans expressed their loyalty and their concern as to the future of their comfortable meeting place for veterans. Will the veterans of the War on Terrorism become members of the VFW? And if so, why or why not? There appears to be a distinct generational gap between the current members of the VFW and the potential future members; one that separates them into a certain space, time, and war experience. The decline of VFW's in America is one that is not likely to ever regain momentum. Current military personnel in Afghanistan and elsewhere, are likely to find community rapport and respect elsewhere, such as churches, family, and future careers. Because the setting of the VFW is based around drinking alcohol, there is some potential confusion and loss in discussing things such as community, religion, politics, and war experiences. I felt this was a problem in talking with community members who after a few drinks, seemed to be expressing exaggerated feelings, or feelings which were added with much alcohol-induced thought.

METHODOLOGY

The environment of the VFW is one that is informal, casual, and socially hospitable. Because of this relaxing environment, I chose to do informal interviews. Participant observation was also key to my research. It allowed me

to view the traditions, and customs held within the VFW, analyze the social setting of the VFW, as well as participate in the conversations, raffles, and humor which went on. However this also made it clear to all “regulars” at the VFW that I was clearly an outsider.

Prior to beginning my research, it seemed as though the VFW would be a perfect place for third place theory to be upheld; the VFW allows for persons to feel comfortable, escape work and home, yet have a common bond where comfort level and previous life experience are key. Upon reading both *The Great Good Place* and *Celebrating the Third Place* by Ray Oldenburg, I was inspired to find out about Northfield’s own third place.

I went to the VFW on numerous occasions to complete my research. I went at different times of the day, and on different times of the week, hoping to fully understand what occurred at the VFW. It was through this process of gauging what would and would not be acceptable, that I was able to conclude, that having informal interviews at the bar itself would be the least intrusive, most informal, honest, and least threatening. A total of eight persons were interviewed, two women and six men.

All my interviews were held in the VFW, almost always over a drink, and were spontaneously conducted. None were scheduled in advance, nor had any follow up discussions, with the exception of one bartender, whom I most frequently saw. Almost all subjects were male, Vietnam vets who were there by themselves. On average I asked the participants ten questions; sometimes substantially more, others, less. Often the nightly TV news would be in the background, and the images of the war in Israel-Palestine, or on terrorism, would arouse conversation of war.

The strength of using informal interviews as a way to retrieve my information was consistent throughout my research. It was in the informal setting that subjects felt most comfortable; the VFW truly was their home away from home. And just as they would not appreciate formality and sociological probing in their home, this type of behavior would be no more appreciated at the VFW. Furthermore, because I am both a female and soon to be a college graduate, I felt some initial gender and class differences, which I thought could possibly hinder my ability to relate to the subjects. It was evident to me from the beginning of this research that if I sensed in a way that the VFW patrons I was interviewing would feel manipulated, or judged based on my questions, my research would not get very far. The informal setting allowed me to sense when I could ask a question, and how deep I could go into it. Obviously some had much to say on one question, and none to say on another, so I was able to retrieve great amounts of specific information on my questions, due to their level of responsiveness.

One problem I felt throughout my research is that while it was evident to me

how the Northfield VFW has become a third place for many veterans, it was not necessarily as evident to them. This effect of being the outsider continually separated me from the experiences and feelings they discussed with me. Moreover, the general American view of Vietnam vets is not overly favorable, and I felt at some times the subjects felt as though I too, had some dislike for their noble work. While this is entirely untrue, I sporadically felt as though I could be being judgmental. It has long been known in this country that Vietnam vets have had a harder time than previous veterans have, and unemployment and alcoholism are two giant concerns.

Another problem with this research, which I did not truly become aware of until midway through, was the consistency and predictability of the subjects' thoughts and beliefs. It almost made me feel as if there should have been somewhat more depth or that I should seek greater information. However, towards the end of my research I realized that my goal of proving third place theory in Northfield, MN was entirely valid, and a true, important American phenomenon.

FINDINGS

Upon organizing the data I had collected from VFW members, I was struck with the uniformity and consistency in my results. The majority of my subjects expressed the same feeling of the VFW's role in their lives, and accepted the notion that the VFW was indeed their third place. These three subjects' stories and insight highlighted the purpose and function of the VFW as a third place.

JOHN

Of the eight subjects interviewed, all felt the VFW played a strong role in veterans' social lives. It was clear that the unique benefits that the VFW had for its members are valued in terms of social capital. The intimate yet informal conversation, the guarantee of meeting, or at least seeing friends, the looseness of structural formation, where unlike any other places the subjects visited.

John, a 50 year-old Vietnam veteran joined the VFW in 1975 after returning home from his tour just north of Saigon. John was in Vietnam for 6 months, protecting a US Air Force helicopter landing. While he did not see many casualties himself, he did feel continual fear of the possibility of invasion. John was 23 when he went to Vietnam, not yet married, so he felt comfortable and willing to fight for his country. He expressed concern and admiration for those soldiers who fought in the war, and had families back at home.

Upon returning home in the fall, John moved to Montana, where he joined his first VFW. This VFW was located in the heart of the small town he lived in. He had moved there with one of his war buddies, and they decided to join together. At first they would only go there once a week, on weekends. They

would usually have dinner there, and have a few drinks. There were many men and women that would go there to dance and socialize. The VFW was one of the most popular spots for people to go to dance and meet people their age. John commented on the quantity of women that would come to the VFW, looking for a boyfriend, lover, or husband.

John felt some sadness after returning from war. He remembered the war welcome the World War II vets received when they returned home, and the disapproval and lack of support he felt from the nation as a whole was disheartening. Upon joining the VFW, John felt pride and a sense of belonging. People congratulated him on his bravery and strength. He felt popular for being a Veteran. Women were impressed with his patriotic, self-sacrificing duty. John felt it was only once he joined the VFW, that he was able to accept what he had done in Vietnam, and see how he could apply his experience there to his life in America.

John met his wife, Judy, at this Montana VFW. It was a Friday night, he had not planned on going out, since he had had a busy week working construction, but went out with his buddy anyways. While others danced and socialized the night away, John sat in a corner booth, for the beginning of the night. It was only when he was on his way out that his friend convinced him to talk with the friend of a woman he was courting. Judy and John felt fireworks that night, and as John said, “the rest is history.” John and Judy moved to Minnesota in the late 70’s where John joined the Bloomington VFW. As John and Judy began a family, John’s frequency at the VFW slowed, but it still remained a constant. John’s wife stopped going to the VFW all together after their first child, Mark, who was born in 1978. In Bloomington, John would meet occasionally with fellow Vets, but in a much less socially structured way than before. John would pop into the VFW after work and get a drink. Sometimes, he would talk to people, other times he would not. When I asked John whether he would ever go to a different place, say a bar or restaurant to get an after work drink, he said; “of course not!” The community John continues to feel with the VFW is one that keeps him coming back. Even though the number of Vets that attend the VFW has drastically decreased, he still feels a common bond with the other patrons visiting the VFW that particular night-one he does not feel elsewhere. John participated in VFW fundraisers in the 1980’s; ones for youth Hockey teams, and fish fry benefits for community members, and veteran assistance programs. John felt the VFW was a way he could continue to use the skills and patriotic values he developed while in the war.

The changes within the VFW have not gone unnoticed by John. The Bloomington, MN VFW has since closed down. He says at least four of the VFW’s in the Twin Cities have closed, and business has gone down dramatically in those still open. The environment in which John met his wife

Judy is all but gone from the VFW, dances, fun social gatherings, wedding celebrations, and the beginning of romantic relationships have since dwindled, and he speculated that they rarely happen today. Within the next ten years, John speculated VFW's as a whole would be absent from the American landscape. He says vets themselves are dying out, and there is not a next generation from which to replenish the membership.

As John and I watched Tom Brokaw speak of military personnel in Afghanistan, I asked him whether he thought the soon-to-be-veterans from this war would join the VFW. John's response was simple, "oh, no, no way, never." John, much like a seasoned sociology student, had also noticed the decline in the social capital Robert Putnam speaks of in *Bowling Alone*. The phenomena of urban sprawl, strip malls, and decrease in community involvement are ones that will not pass by the VFW, he speculated. Upon discussing the idea of third place theory with John, he speculated that the third place is leaving the American landscape, and the consistency, community, and kinship found within the VFW, is being replaced with individualism. John thought that perhaps 2% of veterans of the War on Terrorism would join the VFW, and this would only be done with some sort of family history in mind. John said he had encouraged his son to join the military, and he had once he graduated high school, but had not yet fought in a war, so did not qualify to become a "true" member yet. If John's son does fight in a war and qualifies to join, he thought perhaps he would do so, however the role the VFW played in his son's life would be much different than that of his own. The influence of family values and legacies at the VFW was one which John felt kept the VFW alive. Because John met his wife there, he felt a special bond with the VFW, as if it had provided more than a place to converse with other veterans, but led him into the next stage of his life.

John was in Northfield on this particular night for work, he said, "whenever I am in a town and I know there is a VFW, I always stop in; it's almost like a routine for me." This mentality, and desire for community in a familiar yet specifically different setting, is what make the VFW a place where third place theory is exemplified. The undertone of similarity and friendship is more important than the specific person you may be there to meet; the experience that is the VFW is uniform and standard.

ALLEN

Allen approached me at the VFW one night. I had just sat down, opening my backpack, and Allen said, "well you look like a student, we don't see many of those around here!" I nervously told Allen about my project, and myself, and he replied, "wonderful, then we have a lot in common."

Allen was a student at St. Olaf from 1968-1971. He is originally from

Cannon Falls, MN, and had decided to come to St. Olaf because it was nearby and regarded as a good college. Allen decided in his freshman year that he would study what he found interesting rather than what would get him a job after school. Allen thoroughly enjoyed his sociology classes, and was fascinated with all the aspects sociology offered up. Allen never graduated from college. In the beginning of his senior year, Allen decided to enroll himself in the selected service, as a way to give back some of the fortune and happiness he had found in his life. Only months later Allen found himself on a ship in the Mediterranean Sea, just off the coast of Libya. Because he was not a seasoned member of the military, he served on a protective detail ship, and not directly in Vietnam. It is because of this that Allen is only entitled to social membership at the VFW, and not complete membership. This night, Allen came alone, as he usually does, and was going to read the most recent issue of National Geographic. He said that he always comes alone, and rarely talks to anyone, beside the bartender to order his drink, but he frequents the VFW almost every night. When I asked Allen why he came to the VFW, he replied with one of the key foundations of third place theory; he said, “this is like my living room.”

The idea that a person’s third place is a home away from home is one that boasts a condition of social comfort and equality. Allen would likely not feel as comfortable simply sitting and reading at an average bar, but at the VFW feels he can maintain a low profile and have the psychological comfort he feels at home. While Allen generally does not talk to other veterans, he feels a common bond with the other members in the room. Allen is the third place theorist ideal. While he maintains some apparent anonymity within the room, it is likely that everyone else there knows who Allen is, what he does, where he comes from, and perhaps even what drink he orders.

KATIE

Katie has been a bartender at the VFW for the last two years. She initially became a bartender because there was an opening at Post 4393. But it has been during her time there that she has realized that the VFW is more than just a job. One of the first times I talked with her, she said, “I don’t make good money here, but it is definitely not about the money, there is so much more.” The “more” Katie is identifying is the community and family closeness she has felt since she started working at the VFW. Her father fought in Vietnam for a year and a half, and he has been a regular at the VFW since his return in 1972. She remembers as a teenager picking her father up at the VFW, and has always associated her father with the VFW. Katie now lives with her father, and feels this is yet another way in which she can be close to him.

Katie says the friendship, fun, and feeling of belonging are the real reasons

she works at the VFW. The relationship she has formed with many of the patrons are ones she will have for a lifetime. When Katie began working at the VFW she assumed it would bring her closer to her father, but she never imagined how it would make her feel like she is, “in a room full of uncles.” She claims the care and concern many of the men have for her is much like a family relationship. On one particular evening, Katie was waiting for one of her girlfriends to come and have a drink with her. She said it was common for her to stay at the VFW after her shift was over and continue socializing with patrons and friends. Katie’s feeling of belonging was key to her happiness and continual satisfaction with her employment at the VFW. While she said she could likely make more money at another bar, the feeling of community and purpose would not be the same. She truly feels like she plays an integral part in the lives of the people she interacts with everyday. “To some of the guys here, I am more than just a girl who serves them up a drink, I am their wife, sister, mother and daughter. They need me, and I need them.” Katie has deep relationships with many of the members. She knows their stories of war, love, hardship, and happiness. Having importance beyond her bartending duties makes Katie feel like she has purpose, and makes a difference in people’s lives. “That is not something I would have at another bar, the feeling of family is what I have here.”

In conducting these interviews I was able to see the importance of the VFW in the lives of many different people. It is clear that regardless of age, gender of generation, for those who frequent the VFW, it is a staple of their social life. The VFW is truly a third place for the folks I interviewed; it is in accordance with Oldenburg’s third place theory.

SUMMARY

VFW Post 4393 is a gathering place which fosters third place theory. From its historical background, the VFW has been as a place where Veterans, family and friends, meet to socialize and feel comfortable in a place other than home and work. From the newly returned Veteran to bartender, the VFW is a place where people go to relax in good company on a regular basis. The social capital that is created at the VFW is important to all that attend the VFW. The bond of war is important to the participation of the individual; it is that bond which makes VFW patrons feel part of a group. The social capital which is created at the VFW is valued by all patrons and their is great appreciation for the community and culture it creates. The fate of the VFW nationally is bleak, however membership is up at the Northfield VFW. Rather than forcing veterans to find a new third place, it is likely that the last generation of members will die out, ending the legacy the VFW has been for so many. As America creates new third places, the VFW is one of its legendary locations,

and has paramount importance to those who frequent it.

LITERATURE REVIEW

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Putnam, Robert. "Bowling Alone". New York. Simon and Schuster. 2000

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www.vfw.org

CONSENT

I certify that I have had the nature and procedure of this study on the VFW and the community it creates described to me. The researcher has described the potential benefits and risks of my participation in this study, and has informed me that my data will be kept anonymous. I also understand that I may withdraw from this study at any time and that I will still receive whatever credit or payment has been promised to me.

Signature

Date
