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Griego: Friends' memories build a library

By Tina Griego
Denver Post Columnist

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The call came into Bill Lucero's office last spring.

"This is Bill Bailey," the man on the other end said. "I was Pat's friend. Do you remember me?"

"Of course I remember you," Lucero replied. Pat was Lucero's younger brother, and Bailey was one of his best friends in high school (Pueblo's East, class of 1966). The two got into a lot of trouble together. Three weeks before graduation, Pat persuaded Bailey it'd be fun to cut each other's hair. You know where that went. Two bald-headed boys.

It'd been 40 years since Lucero and Bailey had spoken. Bailey had become a captain in the Public Health Service Commissioned Corps, working for the national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta. Lucero is the presiding disciplinary judge for the Colorado Supreme Court.

On the other end of the line, a nervous Bailey said: "I want to run an idea by you, and I don't know what you are going to think. If you don't think it's OK, say so, and we'll let it go. We'd like to build a library in Vietnam in Pat's honor."

Silence.

Bailey, who'd put off this call several times, could hear Lucero crying.

"You'll have to give me a few moments," Lucero said, and what he thought was: *I thought everyone had forgotten Pat* .

Pat enlisted in the Army after graduation. A lot of Pueblo boys did the same. It is not by accident that the town is home to four Medal of Honor recipients. In 1967, Pat was sent to Vietnam with the 173rd Airborne Brigade. On March 14, 1968, he was killed in action. He was 19.

Forty years pass, Lucero says. You think you've taken your grief, packaged it up, put it away. Then the phone rings, and you realize it's been there all along, just below the surface.

People didn't forget Pat Lucero . Among those who remembered was Jim Lewis. Lewis was also Pat's friend at Pueblo's East. He, too, enlisted after high school, though Lewis became a Marine. He went to Vietnam and during the Tet offensive he met Jesse Griego (no relation). Jesse reminded Lewis of Pat, and they became fast friends. A few months after Pat died, shrapnel pierced Jesse's heart. "He died in my arms," Lewis

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says. "I saw the light leave his eyes."

After that, Lewis says, "there was 41 years full of anger, frustration and guilt." Through his former commander, Lewis became connected to the Seattle-based PeaceTrees nonprofit (peacetreesvietnam.org). The organization cleans up unexploded ordnance in Vietnam. It also builds schools and libraries. Lewis raised enough money to build a kindergarten in Griego's name.

Lewis invited Bailey to the dedication last March and while there, the men turned to each other and said, "We have to do something like this for Pat."

It's Lewis who tells me of the library project, and what I am most struck by is a man who has carried the memory of his friend for 42 years. When I mention that, Lewis says: "You met Pat and you never forgot him. I don't know how many times I wanted to visit Bill (Lucero) and (his wife) Janie and tell them of my love for Pat. How I wanted to ask them their forgiveness for surviving. I couldn't knock on their door and say, 'Guess what, it's me, Jim, and I made it and Pat didn't.' "

All this came out when Lewis and Bailey visited Pueblo last July to talk to Lucero and his family. "We talked for five hours, until almost midnight," Lucero says. "Jim couldn't stop talking and, honestly, I couldn't stop talking. I hadn't talked about it for . . . I couldn't. I've tried to do things in my life that. . . ." He struggles for composure.

"You know you're never going to bring your brother back."

Lucero told the men that his mother had given her blessing to the project. He also reminded them he was a judge, so they'd have to do all the fundraising. We want to do it, the men said, and they have raised \$14,000 of the \$20,000 PeaceTrees has budgeted for the library, which will be built in the Quang Tri province in central Vietnam.

"We had a mission and that was to help the people of Vietnam," Lewis says. "Pat didn't get to finish the mission. We're going to Vietnam and we're going to dedicate this library to Pat, so he, too, can finish his mission."

After Bailey and Lewis visited the Lucero family, Bill Lucero and his mother had their own idea: a Mass for the East High School boys who died in Vietnam. It was a beautiful service, Lucero tells me. Two hundred people showed up. Family members carried photos of their sons down the main aisle of the church. The high school ROTC students lay yellow roses in front of each picture. But what he remembers most are the soldiers who came home, men in their 60s now, who stood alone before the photos and offered a slow, sharp salute.

Pat was not forgotten, Lucero says. None of them were.

Tina Griego writes Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. Reach her at 303-954-2699 or

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