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History speaks

UCSB students won't forget these lessons of Vietnam

A CBS News "60 Minutes" report last Sunday night allowed millions of Americans a chance to witness history teaching at its best — and a rare seat in a class that has grown in popularity from an initial enrollment of 40 in 1979 to a multitude that each fall now overflows a 900-seat classroom in UCSB's Campbell Hall. The televised view of Prof. Walter Capps' Religious Studies 155 course may pose a still greater challenge next fall for the allocators of UCSB's limited classroom space. For the moment, we are content with an immediate sense of well-being and relief.

Through the televised view of Capps' class, a course designed to examine the effect of the Vietnam war on America's values, we were able to meet children of fathers who went to soldier in Vietnam, and did not return. The TV camera let us watch the eyes of those children as they listened to veterans of the war tell of their experiences in battle and after, when embarrassed, angry, shamed and frightened America held its arms stiffly at its sides as its heart-sore warriors returned from the battlefield lost. The camera let us observe one of those children as she grieved before her fa-

ther's name on the black wall of remembrance in Washington, D.C., during the pilgrimage each class makes. It also let us see the tears of the veterans who come to speak as teachers and find a sympathetic ear, and their joy when they find themselves at last embraced by a generation willing to lift its arms in acceptance and sorrow.

We could understand why the children of the soldiers who had died would be passionately interested in a course about the morality of the Vietnam war. But we were astonished that young adults with no apparent connection to the war would sign up in so many thousands, year after year, for nearly a decade now.

And then we were fiercely pleased, proud of the students and of the academic community that thus nourishes their wisdom. For these maturing Americans, the concept of war will never again be a series of dates and scarcely pronounceable names of faceless places in history books. For them, and for all those their consciences can touch during their lives, war is likely to be a chapter in history that they will not help to write.