



Community Engagement

The *Wisconsin Vietnam War Stories* documentary was a perfect fit for our ongoing *Reel to Real (R2R)* project, a one of a kind collaboration between Wisconsin Public Television (WPT) and the Wisconsin Library Association (WLA), which represents both public and academic libraries throughout the state. *R2R* was designed to foster community events that support the programs of Wisconsin Public Broadcasting by working collaboratively with community organizations to discover, understand, and address community needs and aspirations. The project seeks to engage citizens across multiple platforms (on air, online, and in person), build sustainable community relationships, and stimulate citizen participation in topics that matter, supporting and strengthening the belief that Wisconsin Public Television and Wisconsin's libraries are community institutions that are essential to a healthy society. In addition to print materials and hands-on training by WPT engagement staff, events are backed by the promotional tools of WPT, with local press and print pieces developed to individual event needs. ([View a UW-Manitowoc press release.](#))

Wisconsin Vietnam War Stories is a documentary series of three one-hour programs, each comprised of seven segments running 5-8 minutes in length. Early in post-production, five segments were selected from the first hour and put into viewable (not final) form for a *Reel to Real* preview program on DVD. The DVDs were made available for library screenings and discussions, accompanied by an extensive [discussion guide](#) that extended the impact of the documentary beyond broadcast by providing the tools for local event facilitators to help their participants bridge the gap between viewing a program and creating community dialogue and action.

At 18 screenings in 17 libraries across the state, participants viewed the segment reel together at the library then engaged in a discussion about the content and what it meant for their local community. Simply put, *Reel to Real* seeks to turn viewers into doers.

“We had good attendance – 61 for the program, mostly Vietnam vets and their families. I had all kinds of people go out of their way to say thank you for the exhibits we did and hosting of the *R2R* event. It gave some vets who had never reached out to a veterans organization a way to connect with other veterans and begin a dialogue that was meaningful. I got the sense it was the start of something positive in our community. Public libraries have long served as intersecting points for people – a place to engage, learn and discuss issues.”

La Crosse Public Librarian

Following the broadcast of *Wisconsin Vietnam War Stories*, a second *R2R* segment reel was offered to libraries. In response to the first round of screenings, librarians had expressed an interest in gender and ethnic issues during the Vietnam War. Five segments that dealt with these issues in the documentary (featuring women as well as Hmong, Hispanic and Native American servicemen, plus Montagnard tribal people) were then



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selected for the second screening reel which is now being used by participating libraries in community dialogue events.

Throughout the years, we have discovered that participation in community events has powerful effects on issue discussion, community participation and station involvement. According to research conducted by the National Center for Media Engagement (NCME), bringing people together in dialogue increases their likelihood to become involved in their community by 44%. This data is further supported by the evaluation results of our *R2R* events ([visit survey form](#)), with a majority of survey participants reporting that following the viewing of the film and discussion, they learned something new, are likely to seek out additional information, and will discuss the topic with others. 98% of respondents rated the events as “excellent” and “very good.”

R2R has consistently allowed us to increase the contact points we have with the people in Wisconsin’s communities, on different platforms, strengthening, deepening, and expanding both station and library relationships, and connecting people and resources in communities. Many of our respondents reported that they will visit their local library to seek out additional information.

While the participant evaluations helped to measure individual responses, the success of *R2R* has also been reflected in facilitator appraisals. These anecdotal assessments reported “excellent,” “better than prior events” and “above capacity” attendance. All assured us that they would be willing to host additional events; one has already scheduled three films for the upcoming academic year. One librarian reported that “you could hear a pin drop in the room” during the video, followed by a great discussion.