

# The Vintage Voice

Serving The Church Pension Fund's Family of Beneficiaries

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## The Friend I Never Knew

*The Rev. Ken Kessulus*

Memorial Day inevitably reminds my generation of the Vietnam Memorial. Seeing it moved me deeply — this overpowering and imposing black granite monument, inscribed with row after row and column after column of names — nearly sixty thousand of them. Names representing sons, daughters, fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, friends.

Walking beside the wall, I felt compelled, like so many other visitors, to take a rubbing, transferring the impression of a name onto a piece of paper by working a pencil lead across it. The park service provided materials, but I realized that I knew no one of my generation who was killed in Vietnam. A ranger who told me the casualties were indexed by hometown entered “78602” into the computer.

The printout listed one soldier from my town of Bastrop, Texas — Julius Thomas — a totally unfamiliar name. He was born on March 14, 1947, four months before my birth, and died on January 12, 1968. It didn't take me long to guess why I hadn't known him. He was black, and I am white.

I took two rubbings — one for me, one for his mother — if I could find her and if she would accept it. I framed my rubbing, and it hangs in my office where I can see it every day — a constant reminder of truths I do not want to forget.

Julius Thomas and I grew up a town of 3,000 people. Yet, this divided community did not allow us to know each other. We should have been classmates. Perhaps we would have been friends. Maybe I waited on him at the small grocery store where I worked. Maybe he saw me heading into the orchestra seats at the picture show while he headed for the balcony. But as far as I know, we never actually met.

I do not want to forget that I started first grade in an all-white class and graduated twelve years later from an all-white school — more than a decade after *Brown v. Board of*

*Education* ruled segregation illegal. I do not want to forget how close to the edge of that time we still live.

I do not want to forget that Julius Thomas grew up poor while I lived in relative luxury. I do not want to forget that I had the resources to go to college — and thereby gained a deferment from military service — while Julius joined the army and fought in Vietnam. I do not want to forget that, in a way, Julius took my place in a war that was so far away and so difficult to understand.

I do not want to forget that he died in the service of our country, and that I did not. I do not want to forget that Julius Thomas's life ended at age 20, while I married, reared children, had a fulfilling career, developed lasting friendships, lived to bury my parents and see grandchildren born, and continually have anticipated a future of promise and hope. I do not want to forget Julius Thomas.

A friend helped me get in touch with Julius' mother — Mrs. Ruthie Mae Colter. She responded graciously to my nervous phone call and invited me to her home. She gratefully accepted the framed rubbing I made for her. Mrs. Colter seemed to understand my pain over all this, and she accepted my fumbling efforts to be of comfort to her. She showed me her son's bronze star and his photograph. The boy staring at me from her living room wall seemed happy and athletic and confident. He was a hero of obvious courage and strength, and I imagined him understanding the only prayer I could muster — "I am so sorry."

I told Mrs. Colter about Julius' name, framed in my office, and I promised her that I will allow his death to make a difference in my life. Each Memorial Day weekend, especially, as I remember what I do not want to forget, I continue to strive to overcome the lack of understanding and respect that prevented my being his friend.



Ken has returned with his wife, Toni, to his small home town, Bastrop, Texas (where he was rector of the local church for nearly 20 years). They enjoy traveling and spending as much time as possible with grandchildren. Ken works at a rural electric co-op doing employee support (pastoral care in church terms). He is writing history books and a monthly column in the local newspaper while serving as a chaplain for Trinity Wall Street's Clergy Leadership Project.