

# of the year

# Mt. Airy native explores Vietnam experience

by JIMMY J. PACK JR.

lived in this enormous estate designed by Tilden, Register and Pepper for prominent Philadelphia attorney Schofield Andrews, his wife, four children and staff of twenty. It was made popular by its second owner, Eleanor Widener Dixon who bought it in 1945 and oversaw major renovations that created a more traditional French style.

Today the private home still boasts of English oak paneling, mantles and doors in the living room that were once in the hunting lodge of King James 1. These, along with the fireplace, were brought from Dixon's Roneale Manor, her estate in Elkins Park designed in 1925 by Horace Trumbauer. The French baroque stair stretches into the two-story entrance hallway and meets a large, breathtaking window.

While celebrating in this elegant mansion, guests will enjoy activities found only at big Hollywood galas. Astrology readings will give guests insights into what 2009 has in store for them. If the signs do not tell all, perhaps there will be some meaning to how the bowling pins fall, while guests enjoy the basement bowling lane and the bowling contests.

Even the gala's raffle gifts have gone Hollywood. Four lucky winners will be flown to Los Angeles to attend a live *American Idol* show with the country's rising stars. If LA is too far, perhaps a New York City trip is more appealing - one that includes two round trip train tickets, cab fare, tickets to a Broadway show, a Coach bag and gift certificates to Bergdorf, Bloomingdales and Macy's.

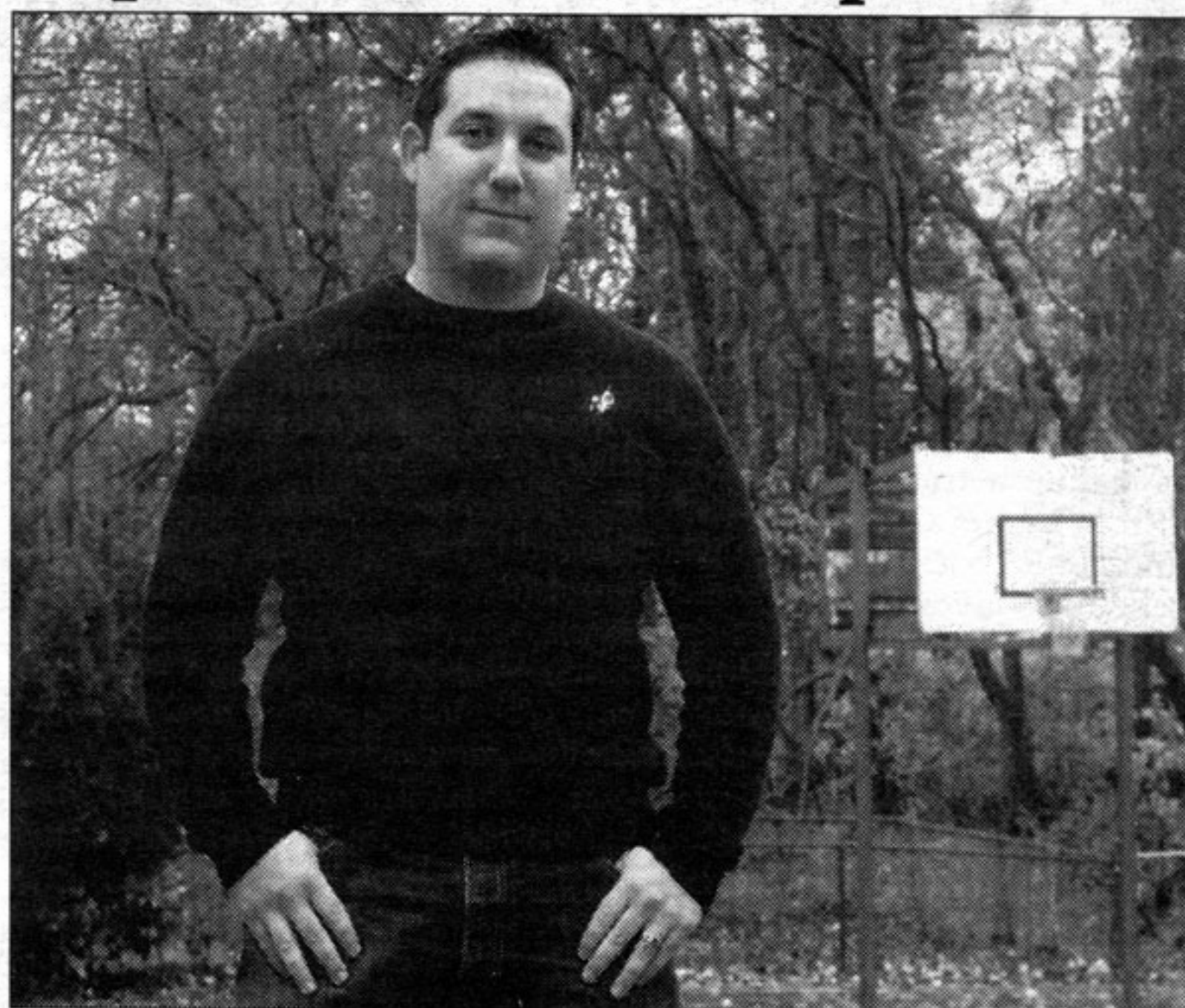
For information about tickets (\$175 a person, \$125 for young preservationists, 35 and under), contact Audrey Simpson at the Chestnut Hill Historical Society 215-247-0417 or go to .

Mt. Airy native Ari Pontz recently published a book inspired by the true-life events of his former basketball coach at the Water Tower in Chestnut Hill.

Pontz, who will hold a boo signing at the Borders in Chestnut Hill on Nov. 22, from 2 to 4 p.m. recently had a Q & A with Local writer Jimmy J. Pack Jr. about his book, *Fishing with Hand Grenades*, which focuses on an 18-year-old Marine grunt named Danny Sullivan and his experiences in the Vietnam War, and his coming to terms with the demons that follow him home.

**Q. You started writing this book when you were 18. What was the inspiration?**

I address this question in pretty succinct detail in the book, beginning on page 191. Briefly, however, *Fishing With Hand Grenades* is based on the true life of "Danny Sullivan," who I first met when I was 14 and he was the coach of a basketball team on which I played. Over the next few years, we developed a close friendship. I knew him then only as a truly generous and kind person. By the time I was 18, I was helping Dan as a coach, and one day at a baseball practice he casually gave me a brief glimpse into his experiences as an 18-year-old Marine in Vietnam. As I learned more about the war and his experiences, I was amazed that someone who had survived such horrible circumstances had created such a positive life for himself. It inspired me to be a better person and appreciate all the great things in my on life. As important, I was struck by the fact that I then was only 18 myself, and the idea of fighting in a war could not have been farther from my mind. For the first time, I really



Local author Ari Pontz began working on his novel when he was 18. (Photo by Jimmy J. Pack Jr.)

began to explore and consider the consequences of war. That day after practice, I went home and mentioned to my mom that someone should write a book about Dan. She suggested that the someone be me and so, with his permission, I started writing.

**Q. When you started writing the book, did you want to be a writer? Or was your business/finance career the field you wanted to pursue?**

I have a creative streak in me that I got from my mom, who is an artist. When I was real young, I wanted to write screenplays. I always managed to write them envisioning Arnold Schwarzenegger as the lead. But I am also hardwired for the business world, a trait I got from my dad, who was an attorney. Fortunately, I was blessed with the support of my parents, and with the energy and determination to work long nights and weekends for years to pursue both goals. The funny thing is, even now I don't entirely think of myself as a writer. I think of it more from the perspective that it was important to me that I document Dan's experiences, and writing a book just happened to be the form in which that manifested itself.

**Q. What did you hope to accomplish with the publication of your book?**

To share an inspirational story of overcoming adversity, to encourage others to find an appreciation for the freedoms we have as Americans, to bring into focus exactly what it is we ask our young people to do every time we give them a gun and a flak jacket and require them to

fight a war, and last but not least, to honor Dan as a good friend and great person.

**Q. What is your connection to Vietnam? To Iraq?**

My connection to Vietnam is entirely made through the eyes of Danny. Everything I know about the war I have learned from or because of him. My connection to Iraq is simply as an American who wants to see our troops come home safely.

**Q. What are your personal feelings on Vietnam? On Iraq?**

This project was never about documenting my personal feelings about either war. Obviously, war is reprehensible. But the book is not intended either as a voice of protest or as a show of support for either conflict. My intention was always to provide as accurate and as honest a portrayal as I could about the realities of armed service, through the eyes of an 18-year-old grunt. The Vietnam War just happened to be the backdrop.

**Q. What was it about Vietnam that you think was hardest on our young soldiers?**

Aside from all the death and destruction, which makes any war hard, I think it was not entirely clear to the soldiers exactly why they were fighting. In World War II, the enemy and the risk presented by not defeating the enemy was much more clear. The soldiers then were literally fighting to save the world. The risk presented to the soldiers in Vietnam was strongly based on an unproven theory of the domino effect. I am not sure that the reasons for being in Vietnam

(Continued on page 23)

## ement Windows and Doors

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# Fishing with Hand Grenades an homage to a hero

(Continued from page 10)

were always understood or accepted, even by those on the ground. This often hurt morale and created a great sense of frustration.

**Q. What do you think are the parallels between Iraq and Vietnam?**

I personally would draw the main parallel that both wars were entered into under a complicated set of pretexts that later turned out to be not entirely valid.

**Q. In your opinion, what is the job of a soldier?**

Come home alive.

**Q. Have you had any dealing with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and is that a focus of your novel?**

I address PTSD inasmuch as Danny suffered from it for many years. Symptoms of paranoia, guilt, fear, nightmares and especially depression all made his life very difficult for almost twenty years after the war. Ultimately, though, the focus is not that he had PTSD, but that he was able to overcome the problems it brought on and build a positive life for himself.

**Q. What do you think motivated Dan to overcome his fears/trauma of the war? What was it in YOU that was so moved by those experiences? Was it just because you couldn't relate to what, as an 18-year-old, he went through?**

Strength and courage, pure and simple. There was no great reward for Dan in sight when he made a conscientious decision to battle back against his demons. There as just his own inner strength and his will to continue to live to get him through it.

I have always tried to be appreciative of all the good things in my life. To see someone so appreciative of their own life, when they were given so many excuses to have taken a different path reinforced how much I had to be thankful for. Being 18, and having the existential introspection that I think most 18-year-olds have, certainly helped.

**Q. What three qualities about Dan do you most admire?**

1. The strength and courage I already discussed.

2. His kindness and appreciation for life.

3. His love for his family and friends.

**Q. What are the events and/or qualities that helped Dan overcome his issues of PTSD?**

The event was that he hit rock bottom. At that point he could either rise back up or bow out. The qualities that helped him rise

back up, I have addressed above.

**Q. If it is the government's job to help our soldiers when they come home, what do you think the American people can do to put pressure on the government to ensure our vets get the help they need for PTSD? Or for other war-related issues?**

They can start by voting for politicians who support these issues, and by supporting organizations who promote the issues also. [www.iava.org](http://www.iava.org) is a great example of an organization who is creating a grassroots effort to affect change. (I am not affiliated with nor do I directly support iava.) Unfortunately, there are bigger headline grabbers now. Honestly, what I think what we need is a slow news day or a big budget movie to bring it back into the consciousness.

**Q. Do you feel the public has done enough to ensure our returning soldiers (both then and now) have (had) adequate care for PTSD?**

I am not sure it is the public's responsibility to ensure that proper care is given for PTSD. The government is responsible for setting and executing military policy, and they should be equally responsible for providing care and services for soldiers. As far as whether the government did enough following Vietnam, the answer Danny would give is a resounding 'no.' As for soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, irrespective of whether the government is doing enough, they should still be doing more. Where the public's role lies (and where many failed during Vietnam, but I think as a whole we are doing a much better job at today) is in ensuring that we don't exacerbate PTSD by failing to show support of our service men and women, regardless of our political affiliations or feelings about our country's role in the conflict.

**Q. Do you think Dan is a hero? If so, what makes him one?**

Yes. But not necessarily in the context of a Marine who fought in Vietnam. Rather, I view it in the context of overcoming the adversities he faced once he was back home. Rising up above the trauma, anger, depression and guilt to become a productive member of society and loving father is what makes him a hero.

**Q. Do you think all war experiences are universal?**

Not at all. I have had the honor over the years to speak to many veterans. Many tout their service as a badge of honor. Others are

very reluctant to discuss anything. A lot of it simply depends on the person and their personality, but also the circumstances surrounding their military experiences. However, what I do think what is universal is that most soldiers are proud to have made their contribution by serving their country.

**Q. Any other books in the works?**

Maybe, but with work it will probably take another thirteen years to finish. If I do write something, it will probably focus on the male role-model Dan often selflessly insists I should have written about in the first place - my dad.

Ari Pontz's novel, *Fishing with Hand Grenades* is available online at <http://www.llumina.com/store/fishingwithhandgrenades.htm>, or at Borders book store.



Mt. Airy native Ari Pontz will be reading from and signing his novel, *Fishing with Hand Grenades*, at the Chestnut Hill Borders on Sat., Nov. 22 from 2 to 4 pm.



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