



COURTESY PHOTOS |

Leading the parade during the celebration of the dedication in 1993. Pictured, from left, are Edie McCoy Meeks, Diane Carlson Evans, Dee Lipmann and Barbie Chiminello.

Diane Carlson Evans pauses in front of the Vietnam Women's Memorial during a storytelling program in 2014.

First Lt. Diane Carlson at an evacuation hospital in Vietnam in 1968.

Carlson Evans to share inspiration at Sheridan College graduation

Diane Carlson Evans will be the commencement speaker at Sheridan College this coming weekend. She'll speak at the Gillette campus Friday and in Sheridan on Saturday. It's an "encore," so to speak. Ms. Carlson Evans was in the Sheridan area last year with the stage play, "A Piece of My Heart," the story of nurses in Vietnam in 1968-69.

The play was written by Shirley Lauro. Ms. Carlson Evans, who lives in Helena, was a Registered Nurse and captain and worked in a burn unit in Pleiku, South Vietnam. After the performances, she facilitated the post-play "talk back" component, often with Vietnam veterans in the audience. All of it was memorable. The Press published stories, photos, commentary.



PUBLISHER'S NOTEBOOK

Stephen Woody

This weekend, Ms. Carlson Evans will talk about "the spirit of Edward Whitney," and how his estate "belonged to the people," creating educational opportunities in the generations to come. She will advocate how the graduates should cast their energies beyond their calling, to serve their county and their communities. (Get a job and be a citizen, too.) Would imagine it will be a packed house at the Bruce Hoffman Golden Dome on the campus of Sheridan College with graduates and proud family members and friends; it seats about 2,000.

"I'm so impressed with the education in Wyoming, with

Whitney Benefits, for example," she told me Tuesday morning in an interview. "Whitney's legacy is immeasurable. He is trusting the people to look beyond themselves and their years to serve others. It is one of life's treasures."

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Ms. Carlson Evans is best known for her founding of the Vietnam Women's Memorial Foundation in Washington, D.C. The memorial is on the National Mall. She grew up on her family's farm, which was first homesteaded by her Swedish immigrant forbears, in 1862. She joined the Army Nurse Corps at 21.

She is retiring on Memorial Day this year from the leadership of the Foundation as it's being turned over to Eastern National, an organization that supports educational and interpretative missions of the National Park Service.

She attended the dedication of Vietnam Veterans Memorial (The Wall) in 1982 and two years later, the dedication of the "three soldiers" Vietnam War memorial nearby. Inspired by the service of 11,000 of her fellow Vietnam War nurses, she founded the Vietnam Women's Memorial Project that same year. She recalls vividly the "pushback, the antagonism, the leave it alone" sentiment of the time. It became a long mission of testimonies before Congress, lobbying and fundraising.

Then Morley Safer of "60 Minutes" called. Safer, who had reported on the war for CBS News in

Vietnam for five years, gave the project a national audience. One nurse who went on the program with Ms. Carlson Evans, Maggie Arriola, was asked on camera by Safer if she had ever cried, given all the death and trauma surrounding the nurses and their service. "Only once," she told Safer. She recalled a young soldier who had lost both arms, both legs, and was blind from blast wounds. It was their last contact until the program aired in 1989 when Lloyd Kantor, living in the Bronx, New York, was listening to the "60 Minutes" program and exclaimed: "that's me she's talking about!" Kantor had survived and they were reunited.

That particular program was a pivotal point in funding and awareness. The bronze statue was dedicated Nov. 11, 1993, and features four figures, three women and a wounded soldier. Vice President Al Gore, also a Vietnam veteran, made the dedicatory remarks.

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Though she is leaving the Vietnam Women's Memorial Foundation, she isn't retiring from what she loves: veterans' causes. "I love doing it," she says, adding she travels all over the country giving presentations. She's been the recipient of a number of awards and honorary university degrees, all in the name of celebrating the men and women who have served their countrymen in uniform. "I want to share the message of nurses, of women, of veterans."

She will once again this weekend.