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# Niskayuna NEIGHBORS



PAUL  
ZONDERMAN

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*Serving His Country  
and Community*

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# resident feature



## PAUL ZONDERMAN

### *Serving His Country and Community*

BY JENNA CAPUTO | PHOTOS BY BRIAN L. JONES PHOTOGRAPHY & CONTRIBUTED BY ZONDERMAN FAMILY

Every soldier has a different experience that shapes their return to civilian life. Paul Zonderman is a Vietnam War veteran that came home during a turbulent time in our country. His memories have stayed with him ever since, having a profound influence on his return home.

Born as the oldest of four in Boston, Paul and his mother lived in his grandparents' home through WWII while his father was away at war serving as a Major in the Medical Corps of the Army. Upon his return, Paul's father was stationed in Utah, then assigned to Tyler, TX, where they lived together again as a family. Paul remembers well when everyone celebrated, "The war is over!" Eventually, he and his parents moved to Newton, MA.

Paul spent many summers in Wolfeboro, NH at their lakeside cabin nestled in 25 acres of woods. The summers were about boating, water skiing, and great family gatherings. Paul would head out on the boat in the evenings to visit friends on an adjoining lake, coming home after dark, guided only by his father's car's headlights parked on the shore.

Paul had many interests growing up, starting with printing. He

had a printing press in his home, which he used to print stationary, invitations, and tickets for his friends. He also had a dark room in his basement to develop his own pictures. But what he really loved was amateur radio. Paul received his first ham radio license in 1958 and has enjoyed talking to many people both locally and around the world ever since. He belonged to ham clubs in both Boston and Schenectady, upgrading his license to an "Extra Class (W2PZ)." He has certification as "Worked all Continents" and "Worked all States."

Paul majored in psychology at Brandeis University. He planned to continue to law school, but he wanted to serve his country as well. He spoke to recruiters for the Marine Corp during his senior year. They said they had the perfect program for him—the PLC Law Program. "Here's the deal," they explained to Paul. "In the summer after your first year of law school, you come down to Quantico, VA for three months and complete (survive) the Platoon Leaders Class and then be sworn in as a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant and return to law school for two years. You must maintain a C average. If not, you immediately owe us three years





of infantry duty. If you both graduate Cornell Law School and pass the MA Bar Examination on the first try, then you are a Marine and you will begin your three years of active duty and go back to Quantico for six months of intensive infantry officer training. Then off to your first duty station."

On August 2, 1964, Paul married Ann, his friend's cousin and someone he knew starting from when she was 12 and he was 16. He always thought that Ann would have to be dedicated and courageous to enter into the role of a military wife. They drove to Quantico and rented an off-base apartment where he survived the exhausting six-month training, often returning home with boots filled with blood from his broken blisters.

His first duty station was in the Mojave Desert at the Marine Corps Base in 29 Palms, California, where the average temperature was 115 degrees. Initially assigned as Adjutant of Headquarters Company, they later added Casualty Calls Officer on to his duties. The Vietnam War was warming up. If a Marine was killed on duty, Paul was the first person, accompanied by a Navy Chaplain, to convey the message to the soldier's wife or parents. "It was gut wrenching," he says.

During his free time, he taught Ann how to pistol shoot and ride a motorcycle. They had their first child at the Navy Hospital, but unfortunately, they received their own tragic news when the baby passed away just two days later. A few months later, Paul passed by his Commander's office and was told, "Hey, Zonderman, you are going to Vietnam. The orders will come through in a couple of weeks. You will have thirty days to drive back to Boston."

"Ann was three months pregnant at the time," says Paul. "What a horrible thing to have to tell her. I went home for lunch and told her directly. She cried hard. Though our families were there, I would not be with her. This was particularly difficult because I wouldn't see my child until she/he was seven months old."

Paul began his service in Vietnam, where he found soldiers living in wooden huts with tin roofs, screen windows, and a single light bulb in the ceiling. There was no running water. He didn't even have a gun for protection until more than a week after his arrival, and he had to search through a trashcan for jungle fatigues. Paul had three general

responsibilities—his main duty was Trial/Defense Counsel in General Courts Martials. He had an additional duty as Division Foreign Claims Officer. As an attorney stationed near the DMZ in Phu Bai, he investigated and handled all the claims of civilian injuries in the region. If the injury was caused by a non-military action, then HQ had to determine compensation and Paul would deliver it to the civilians in the jungles—perhaps the riskiest part of his service there. He had a periodic responsibility as the base perimeter watch officer, the sole officer in charge of the troops in defensive foxholes around the Phu Bai base. Time was also spent in constant watch for the regular mortar attacks. He recalls one lunch break from interviewing two witnesses in Dong Ha (on the DNZ).

Direct artillery fire slammed the base, taking out the tent and vaporizing the witnesses.

"When you witness such a tragedy, you don't have time to emot. It means acting decisively to protect yourself. You don't have time to be shocked or mourn. You are motivated by hyper-vigilance," says Paul.

Receiving letters and tapes from Ann and his family back home were his respite, carrying him through his time in Vietnam. Paul bought a tape recorder in Vietnam so he could record a 30-minute message to Ann. She would then erase it and record one in return so they could at least hear each other's voices.

In 1967, Paul returned to the United States and finally held their daughter Lauren in his arms for the first time. There was little time to readjust to civilian life. As a husband and new father, he knew he needed to get a job right away. Two years later, their son Jeffrey joined the family. Paul worked a series of jobs in the Boston area over the next few years, in both legal firms and private practice as well as a session as Assistant DA at the Norfolk County Superior Court and teaching Business Law at Fisher Jr. College night school.

Things changed during a fateful visit to Ann's sister in Niskayuna. His sister-in-law needed to get an in-home insurance exam, and Paul chatted with the nurse after they finished up. The nurse's husband was a high-level attorney with GE, and she suggested they meet. After a series of appointments with GE execs in Fairfield, CT, Paul received a job offer here in Schenectady. He accepted and they moved to Niskayuna in 1977.

"GE kept me busy," says Paul. "I became a labor lawyer doing all of Steam Turbine's arbitrations from Maine to South Carolina, sat in on local union negotiations, and gave lectures to the shop workers on the new labor laws. I also counseled GE on strikes, picketing, unfair labor practices, and elections." Ann took a position as a K-12 Speech and Language Therapist in the Amsterdam School District and went to school at night to obtain her master's from St. Rose, all while being a full-time mom in addition to her volunteer work in the community.

After 10 years, GE cut Paul in their lay-offs during the business decline in the late '80s. This led to him becoming an independent labor arbitrator until he was voted in as one of the two Niskayuna Town Justices, beginning in 2002. In 2003, he was also voted into the National Academy of Arbitrators, a distinguished group of only 200 members from all over the US. He handled all kinds of cases from school to corporate arbitration. As Town Justice, he often got up in the middle of the night to open the courthouse for hearings for those the police had arrested.





"You see all kinds of things as a judge," Paul comments. "I had one guy who brought his car dashboard into court with him to show me that his speedometer didn't work! I always took the time to listen and consider all sides of each issue before I made a ruling. I have always considered a judge as 'the conscience of the community.' It is a heavy responsibility trying to satisfy the motto of 'keeping the town a safe place to live and raise a family.' It is also a heavy responsibility to treat all that appear before you equally and with respect, and to use the power to help deserving people when possible. I'd have to say that being elected and serving twelve years as Niskayuna Town Justice is my greatest career honor, and I thank the thousands of Niskayuna voters who elected and re-elected me." After 12 years on the bench, Paul retired from the Town in 2014 and gave his time to several veteran organizations.

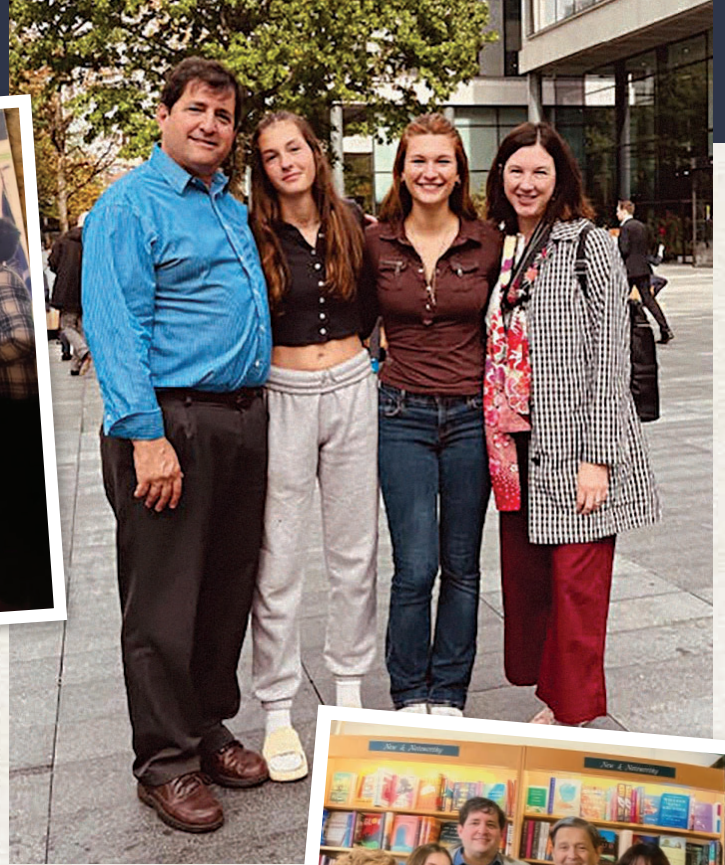
Paul and Ann have both been very involved in their community. Paul was a Niskayuna Little League coach and manager of Jeff's Little League team, served on the Bethesda House Board of Advisors, the Niskayuna Zoning Appeals Board, guest speaker in a Siena College Literature course, Chairman of the Anti-Defamation League Albany Chapter, Board President of Congregation Agudat Achim, involved in the radio communication for Niska-Day, and presently an active member in the Disabled American Veterans Chapter 88 and the Jewish War Veterans chapters 105 and 106 as well as commander for both of the JWV Posts. Ann volunteered for the Working Circle on Girls Club, helping troubled girls work through life's challenges using mentors, open discussions, and strong female role models in addition to her work with the Daughters of Sarah Senior Home, the Jewish Federation of Northeastern New York, Congregation Agudat Achim, the Bethesda House Board, and was one of the founders of Protect Our Democracy (POD), which worked to register high school students to vote.

"Our lives are rich in close family relationships, and we truly value our group of friends here in Niskayuna. They are in enduring marriages and give respect to one another, which is such a blessing in life," comments Ann with a smile, as she recalls their 59 years of marriage.

Paul successfully found his way back into civilian life, but his experience in Vietnam still plagued him as effects from the Agent Orange—the toxic defoliant sprayed down on the jungle by US planes—took effect. "It took many years before the damage was acknowledged," says Paul. "There were lawsuits and a huge settlement of a class action. Many soldiers died from it as civilians. In 2002, I was diagnosed with Chronic Lymphocytic Leukemia (blood cancer). It's not in remission, but I managed to keep it under control all these years."

While proud of his service during the war, Paul's views on the war itself have remained the same. "The Vietnam War was a waste of time and lives," he writes in his account of the war. "My heart goes out to the parents of the young men and women who didn't make it home. They answered the call. They had faith in their government."

Despite his thoughts on the war and the dirty looks and catcalls he got when he returned home, Paul is proud to be a Marine. "When I see



another Vietnam veteran, I shake his hand and say, 'Welcome home, brother,' to provide the words they did not hear," he says.

Paul wanted to have a record of his time in the military for his family. After retiring in 2021, he decided to write a book as a keepsake for his family: Lauren—beautiful, smart, accomplished, an attorney with a Master of Applied Behavior Analysis, living in Newbury, MA; Jeff, an Ophthalmologist—bright, spirited, caring, and dedicated to his family and profession, living in Niskayuna with offices in Clifton Park and Albany; his wife Kyra—an accomplished illustrator and author of children's books as well as a designer of clothing; granddaughter, Bella (20)—a beautiful young woman with keen insight, is a junior at Syracuse University's School of Performing Arts—she dances, sings, and acts—the total package; Claire (15), a freshman at Niskayuna High—bright, thoughtful, caring, and a people person, presently setting her goals around soccer. Paul published *Justice in the Jungle*, a personal account of his time in Vietnam with firsthand stories about what it's like to be called to serve and the toll it takes on the soldiers and their families. Interest grew outside of the family as well, so he has since released it for sale. *Justice in the Jungle* is available on Amazon and at the Open Door Bookstore in Schenectady.

"I'm proud of my civic duty for enlisting in the military service with the 3rd Marine Division, which was awarded the Presidential Unit Citation, a very high-level group award," he says. "But at the top of the list, my greatest personal achievement, generating the feelings of love, pride, respect, fun, and success, is my family: Ann, Lauren, Jeff, Kyra, Bella, and Claire." ∞