Maya Lin’s Vision

Pre-reading

Questions: Who is Maya Lin? What do you hope to learn about her?
Definitions: Unanimous – in total agreement
Sacrifice – giving up something for the sake of something valued

Reading*

Unlike other wars in United States history, the United States did not leave the Vietnam War victorious. While soldiers from other wars had returned home heroes, soldiers of the Vietnam War were not honored and were often met with hostility. The nation was divided over the war. In 1979, Jan Scruggs became obsessed with developing a monument to those who died in the war and others who were still missing.

Scruggs rallied support for his ideas and created a nonprofit organization called the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund. He campaigned to get support, financial contributions, land, and a bill passed by Congress. It took several years to get everything in place. When all was ready, Scruggs announced a nationwide design competition with a $20,000 prize for the winner.

Maya Lin, a twenty-one year old architecture student at Yale University, was taking a class in funeral architecture. Since the contest to design the Vietnam Veterans Memorial had just been announced, the professor of the class decided it would be a good opportunity for his students to participate. Lin went to the site where the memorial was to be built. She envisioned a design.

There were over 1,500 entries (some sources say over 2,500), but Lin’s design was unanimously chosen by the contest judges. Lin was an unknown in the world of art and architecture and many wanted to know about her.

Maya Ying Lin was born in Athens, Ohio on November 5, 1960. In 1948, when the Communists came to power in China, her parents immigrated to the United States. Her father became the Dean of Fine Arts at Ohio University. Her mother worked as a poet and professor of Asian and English Literature. She grew up in a world of art and literature.

The memorial Lin designed was a V-shaped, black granite wall set into the ground. Etched in white were the names of all the soldiers who died in the war and those who were still missing. Though it was approved by committee judges, it was met with great opposition. Some said the design was not heroic. Others said it displayed symbols of shame, degradation, and dishonor. Lin felt it was a symbol of sacrifice and the sorrow of war. She did not want it changed from her original design.

After months of negotiations, a compromise was reached. Two additional memorials, one of three soldiers and the other a monument to women in the war, would be added a short distance away. Eight months after construction began, the Vietnam Veterans memorial, without the two additions, was finished.

It was dedicated on Veteran’s Day, November 13, 1982.

Called “The Wall,” the sleek black memorial is a tourist attraction on the National Mall in Washington D.C. It lies on a slope between the Washington and Lincoln Memorials. Millions visit The Wall every year. Many look for names of loved ones. Paper is available at The Wall to make rubbings of the names.

Maya Lin has impacted millions of lives with her memorial. Even those not directly affected by the war can be touched by The Wall. It will remain as a symbol of honor and courage, long after those who know individuals on The Wall are gone.

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Understanding

1. What do the words **negotiate** and **compromise** mean? _____________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________________________________

2. How does Lin describe the meaning of “The Wall”? _______________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________________________________

3. What were people’s opinions of the Vietnam War? _______________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________________________________

4. Where is The Wall? Why do you think that place was selected? _____________________________
   ___________________________________________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________________________________

5. Why did some people oppose Lin’s design? _______________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________________________________

6. How can those “who are not directly affected by the war be touched by The Wall”? ___________
   ___________________________________________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________________________________

7. Do you think it’s surprising that Lin got the design job? Why or Why not? ___________________
   ___________________________________________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________________________________

Writing

**Option A:** Summarize the reading in your own words.

**Option B:** If you have seen The Wall, what did you think of it? Write about your experience.

**Option C:** What event or person do you think deserves a monument of honor? Why that event or person? What do you think the monument should look like?

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