

# A Katy Veteran's Journey Home

Vietnam veteran Sam Luna honored by the White House for giving back to those who have served

*Written by  
Noreen Stavinoha*

*Select Photography  
by Juliana Evans*

Katyite Sam Luna was recently named one of the U.S. White House's Champions of Change for his work helping fellow veterans and current military service personnel



An injured Luna is surrounded by fellow soldiers during the Vietnam War



Katy Vietnam veteran Sam Luna knows firsthand the difference caring individuals can make in the lives of American service men and women faced with the haunting memories of war. After suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) most of his life, Luna attended a Vets Journey Home weekend in Maryland in 2005. Joined by fellow veterans and active military personnel, the free weekend retreat changed his life. As a way to give back, he decided to start a local chapter and become an advocate for Katy area veterans.

The White House recently took notice of Luna's many contributions, honoring him as a Vietnam Veteran Champion of Change alongside 10 other Americans. Luna traveled with his wife Gloria to Washington D.C. for a televised ceremony at the White House. "It was an unexpected honor and quite a thrill for my wife and I to meet with other Vietnam War vets doing similar things around the country," he shares.

### Journey to the U.S. Capitol

Champions of Change, a successor to President George H.W. Bush's Thousand Points of Light program, honors Americans going above and beyond every day. During Luna's trip to the U.S. Capitol, he toured the White House, listened to opening remarks from the undersecretary of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), and participated in a panel discussion about veteran projects around the nation with the other honorees.

Questions were fielded by a representative from the Wounded Warriors organization before an audience of active military personnel. "Before we left, we had a chance to talk to the surgeon general for about 30 minutes, and we were interviewed by a reporter from *Stars and Stripes* (a military newspaper), among other publications," Luna shares with a smile. "It was an incredible experience."

### Helping Veterans with PTSD

For 35 years after his time spent serving, Luna told himself everything was fine. His family knew better, but they didn't know where to turn, either. Luna would hit a wall with his fist in anger, lash out at his wife and children, and keep to himself at social gatherings. So when the nightmares started after he retired, Gloria encouraged him to get help.

When he went to the VA hospital, he was diagnosed with PTSD and was hospitalized for a while. During that time, he was encouraged to take up a craft project as part of the treatment. The beautifully fashioned clay mallards sitting on a table in his home serve as a reminder of the healing that comes from immersing oneself in a creative project. "I got so involved in making the birds, they had to pry me away from that to do other things," he shares with a grin.

Following his hospital stay, Luna participated in his first Vets Journey Home weekend, which proved a turning point in his life. "When he first came home, I could see a change in him," says Gloria. "He no longer had that angry look to him." He decided then and there to start a chapter in Texas. One year later, the group's first retreat was held in Houston.

"A lot of my fellow Vietnam vets have reached retirement age and they are dealing with those same dark experiences I did," explains Luna. "They aren't aware of the help available to them. They don't know they have PTSD."

### Rebuilding Trust

The Vets Journey Home weekend creates a safe place where veterans can build trust with volunteers, who are either former military personnel or civilians with a connection to the military, and fellow participants. They soon begin to see that their war experiences may have kept them from coming home in the truest sense. Residual feelings of stress and anxiety can cause insurmountable barriers between veterans and their families. When they begin sharing those experiences with someone who understands and doesn't judge them, the healing begins.



Sam and Gloria Luna enjoy the smiles of their children and grandchildren

Mark Salinas is also a Vietnam veteran and a graduate of one of Luna's retreats. "It made me see a lot of things I hadn't seen before," he recalls. "I came away relieved and excited, and I hope to keep in touch with some of the people I met there."

Lawren Bradberry, a veterans coordinator at the University of Houston, sought out the Vets Journey Home program after having served during the conflict in Kosovo. "You think the world has changed when you return, and it takes

something like this program to make you realize it's you who has changed," says Bradberry. "I'm not holding my breath anymore, I'm less angry and less sad, and I'm more motivated to change others' lives. This ushers you into a new season of life."

### Seeking Support

Luna hopes by reaching out to veterans young and old alike, they will be free to face their experiences head-on with the support of those who truly understand and can help. Along with the Vets Journey Home program, Luna also serves in the local chapters of the American Legion, the Purple Heart, and Veterans of Foreign Wars.

"My commitment to veterans is 24/7," says Luna. "Wherever I go, I talk to whoever asks me about it and try to get the veterans' message out there. America needs to see the dire need of getting these guys taken care of." **KM**



*NOREEN STAVINOHA lives in Katy with her miniature schnauzer and loves to tell the stories of interesting people.*