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## SAIC War Vet Joins Chicago's Vet Art Project

By Brandon Kusters

SAIC undergraduate Matthew Ping, 26, is a veteran of the war in Afghanistan. He is one of many veterans who uses the creative process as a means of coping with his experiences serving overseas.

"When I came to SAIC in January [2009], I was looking for veteran artists. I was hoping to start a student group." Ping hoped that the formation of a student group would garner support from other organizations throughout the country. "I came to find out, though, that there were only four other student veterans at SAIC, at the time." A few more veterans have enrolled at SAIC since then, and Ping is wants to get everyone involved.

Ping discovered the Vet Art Project, a Chicago based organization that strives to connect veterans with community-based artists and other community members to nurture cathartic, creative expression.

Lisa Rosenthal, resident playwright for the Chicago Dramatists, founded the Vet Art Project a few years ago. She was inspired to help after listening to a radio program featuring Edward Tick, author of *The War and the Soul*.

The book examines how various cultures treat warriors before and after their wartime service.

In our culture, Rosenthal said, "we fail to take care of our men and women in the armed services before, after, and during their service at wartime."

One goal of the Vet Art Project is to encourage veterans to explore "the healing power of storytelling, beyond peer groups and counseling. I thought: artists can bridge that gap," said Rosenthal. The project facilitates dialogue between veterans and artists so that the veterans may explore their creativity."

Ping, whose body of work encompasses sculpture, video, and writing, finds a unique forum for personal expression and a sense of community through the organization. "I participated in a performance held ... at the Chicago Cultural Center. I read poetry and played music" said Ping. This event, part of the Incubator Series at the Chicago Cultural Center, included over 60 artists, 30 veterans, and 250 other community members. Ping also actively participates in workshops with the group. In the workshops, Ping said, "We bring vets and family members and artists and usually a couple of art therapists and psychologists who deliver lectures." Educating the public at large, and fostering communication among veterans, artists, and other community members, is key to the mission of Vet Art Project.

Jerry Kykisz, a director on the board of the National Vietnam Veteran's Art Museum in Chicago, believes that it is tremendously beneficial for veterans to produce this work, and for the work to be seen by other veterans and civilians alike. "If it's therapeutic for the guy [producing the work]," Kykisz said, "of course, it's going to affect other veterans who see [the work]... When they see an art exhibit that portrays emotions and scenes they have experienced... if they see it on a wall, it validates their experience... it shows them they are not alone. For the civilians, especially relatives of a veteran, they begin to understand some of the emotional impact of the war."

"The really beneficial part," Ping said, "was going to meetings and talking about war experiences. Suddenly here you are, among some people who are with family members they have lived with their entire lives, who they have never discussed certain experiences with." For many veterans, Ping said, these discussions allow "veterans to be on a closer level with their loved ones."

Ping is pleased that the project can help "the community see a different dynamic of veterans. Everybody has that image of the Vietnam vet sitting in their wheelchair out in the street, drug-addled and with long hair," he said.



Programs like the Vet Art Project “give more power to the ideas and creativity of veterans in the public eye.”

Photo courtesy Chicago Vet Art Project.



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[Lisa Rosenthal](#)  
OCT 9, 2009

Thanks to you Matt for helping us all learn from your experiences. We feel very privileged to have you working with and teaching us the way. Peace is possible through Art!

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