

The Heroes Among Us

Lisa Rosenthal, Vet Art Project

"Artists may come to the project because they want to help veterans...what they often don't expect is to be transformed by the process."

Lisa Rosenthal is hungry. Self-proclaimed as "insatiably curious about the world," she has taken her passion for art and her experience as an accomplished writing coach, book editor and playwright and created the Vet Art Project, an arts workshop that presents opportunities for veterans to work in collaboration with professional artists from all disciplines to create new art about war and service for public performance and viewing.

"Supporting our troops means being there not only for the welcome home, but also being present afterwards," says Rosenthal.

And it is often in the 'afterwards' that veterans need the most support. Of the 1.64 million service members who have been deployed for OEF/OIF as of October 2007, it is estimated that approximately 300,000 currently suffer from symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or major depression.¹

Vet Art Project confronts PTSD and other issues challenging today's veterans with a mission to support and create stronger voices among veterans, while providing new opportunities for artists in venues that allow us to hear the voices of our veterans, fostering discussion about how war affects us all. The origin of the Vet Art Project is a story of true inspiration.

In 2007, Rosenthal heard a radio interview with Edward Tick, psychologist and author of, *War and the Soul*, and was moved to action. Tick spoke about the rising statistics of PTSD among veterans and the healing power of storytelling outside of traditional therapeutic and peer-group settings as essential for their return and adjustment back into their communities. She bought the book. She read it. She was transformed:

"I realized that artists could help build the bridge between veterans and the community—and that I could help make that happen."

Rosenthal began studying with Tick and attended numerous retreats and training sessions on trauma, resilience and healing, interviewed veterans on their experiences and lead outreach workshops to develop a community of talented artists and creative arts therapists. The first public presentation of the Vet Art Project took place in February at Preston Bradley Hall in the Chicago Cultural Center with a month-long Incubator Series involving 30 veterans, more than 60 artists and 500 attendees, culminating in a public performance on February 23 of 19 multi-media pieces. Since then, the program has steadily grown.

With a current home base at the Chicago Cultural Center, Vet Art Project boasts satellite projects throughout the country, including: Seattle, Phoenix; Santa Fe; San Diego; Laramie, Wyoming; Birmingham, Alabama, Texas and on campus at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, Illinois. Further, Vet Art Project offered a performance on Veterans Day 2009 at DePaul University in collaboration with Veterans Advocacy Group of DePaul and plans being laid to work with other veterans groups on college campuses across the country.

In turn, Rosenthal has grown artistically, and the rapidity by which veterans transform through the project is of a particular joy to her.

"Listening to veterans' stories seems very much like being there for your buddy in battle," says Rosenthal.

Witnessing the visual and performance art of veterans who participate in the project reinforces only that sentiment.

"Vet Art Project creates a space for exploration for veterans—to find their way in their own way, and in their own time," says Brockton Hardnett, a veteran of OEF, serving 2005-2006 as a 1st Lieutenant in the 53rd Separate Infantry Brigade out of West Palm Beach, Florida. "Through Vet Art Project, I began to realize how to empower myself."

Highlighting the spirit of volunteerism and ingenuity in support of our nation's service members.

tizations of *Beowulf* and Shakespeare examine the soldier's experience in battle and connect 'the path of warriors then to the path of warriors now.'

"Vet Art Project has helped me process some traumatic events from my service as a military policeman. Exploring art has helped me discover details that my psyche had covered up and has helped me work through my challenges with PTSD," says Navarro-Lowery.

Vet Art Project encourages community among its participants. Matt Ping, who served as an Army artilleryman



Veteran, Matt Ping, with his work, "Shell Shock"



(left to right) Kevin Rushing, Veteran Liaison, DePaul University; Adam-Navarro-Lowery, Veteran and DePaul University student and Lisa Rosenthal rehearse for a Vet Art Project performance.



Jessa Carlstrom, Lead Artist, Vet Art Project, Chicago with Rosenthal, Founder of the Vet Art Project

in Afghanistan in 2006-2007, is a student at the Art Institute of Chicago, where he currently studies sculpture, video and writing.

"All veterans have a shared experience," says Ping, "Vet Art Project has made me more open

to people and has given me an outlet to help other veterans."

Helping veterans help themselves through their own self-discovery means creating a safe place for them to explore. The path each participant finds in his or her own way never goes without the resource of clinicians, counselors and psychologists, readily available, to make sure that when veterans open their hearts, they are fully supported if needed.

Vet Art Project shares a similar mission to the USO in that it acts as a bridge between the civilian and military communities. It happens to use art as the conduit.

"An artist has a responsibility to effect positive social change," says Rosenthal. "I can't just make art for myself and make it meaningful. It needs to make a difference and it needs to matter to other people."

That Vet Art Project matters is no question. And the thriving community of veterans and artists that benefit from its creations, attest to that fact.

To learn more and support the Vet Art Project, visit:

www.vetartproject.com

1. 2008, Rand Corporation; www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND_MG720.sum.pdf