



# FOREST PARK REVIEW

Tuesday, November 10, 2009

## A transforming experience

*Veterans, artists and therapists forever changed by the Vet Art Project*

**By Josh Adams**  
Editor

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His words: Adam Navarro, a veteran of the 101st Airborne Division of the United States Army, rehearses a reading he will perform this Veterans Day. Navarro served in Kosovo in 2001 and served during the global war on terror. He is one of several area veterans participating in a program that helps military veterans express themselves through art.  
JASON GEIL/Staff Photographer

When Lisa Rosenthal set her sights on developing an artistic, emotional outlet for military veterans, she had a hunch her life would be changed forever. She hasn't been disappointed.

In February, after taking her inspiration from Soldier's Heart, a project of the International Humanities Council, Rosenthal's Vet Art Project debuted at the Chicago Cultural Center. In mere months, the Vet Art Project has inspired therapists, veterans and artists in Arizona, Texas, New Mexico and Washington to begin similar programs where new understandings about the tolls of war are realized.

Here in Chicagoland, Rosenthal estimated that 100 veterans and their families have participated in the Vet Art Project, and through whatever medium feels best - from dance to poetry - their stories are showcased for the community. Artists participating in the project help polish the performance, and therapists guide discussions and provide boundaries during the sometimes intense process.

"Honoring a veteran is about helping a veteran," Rosenthal, a Forest Park artist, said. "Helping a veteran can't stop after we're done with the welcome home parade."

On Tuesday, Rosenthal joined a panel discussion in Chicago as part of the mayor's Veterans Day Reception. Participants in the Vet Art Project also explained how this approach to creative therapy has impacted their lives.

Wednesday, Nov. 11, the Vet Art Project is partnering with the Veterans Advocacy Group at DePaul University for a free, multi-part exhibit featuring art displays, live performances and a workshop on helping veterans adjust to life at home.

David Faigin, a doctoral candidate with an interest in community psychology, contacted Rosenthal back in February after learning of the Vet Art Project through a Review article on its inception. Also a Forest Park resident, Faigin is doing his internship at the Hines VA Hospital. The veteran population, he said, is one that he hopes to work with throughout his career.

On the whole, society harbors several misunderstandings about military veterans, said Faigin. One of the critical components of the Vet Art Project is that the general population is invited to participate and learn why these service men and women return as different people - and those who've lived through traumatic experiences will be transformed, he said. Part of that learning process for non-veterans means checking political beliefs, stereotypes and other preconceived ideas at the door.

"You can't control what that veteran or that family member is sharing and you may have very, very strong feelings about it," Faigin said. "It's that veteran's story."

Veterans of wars in Vietnam, Korea, Iraq and Afghanistan have participated in the Vet Art Project. Family members, too, have been an integral part.

Both Faigin and Rosenthal said that one of the most common hurdles - especially for Vietnam veterans - is trust. The artists and the therapists have to go beyond lip service when talking about the Vet Art Project being a judgment-free, safe environment. Another wrinkle in building that trust is the unorthodox setting, said Faigin. When veterans or family members walk into a clinical setting there is a general understanding of the relationship between

the therapist and the patient. The Vet Art Project though, might start a program with 15 minutes of dancing.

"The integration can be messy," Faigin said of creative therapies, "but my feeling as a practitioner is I'm not going to define for somebody how that should go down."

With the rapid growth of the Vet Art Project into other areas of the country, Rosenthal is being asked to produce a manual of sorts to lay the foundation for these new groups. She has discussed the program's benefits at various symposiums, and is forging relationships with hospitals within the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Rosenthal said the experience of working with veterans and their families has been so moving, she decided recently to go back to school for a degree in trauma therapy.

"This is my life's work," Rosenthal said. "This is my life's work."

### On Veterans Day

#### The Journey Home:

A Veterans Day event on war, service and homecoming

Wednesday, Nov. 11 at DePaul University, 1 E. Jackson in Chicago at the North Side Café and DePaul Club on the 11th floor

**5-7 p.m.:** Visual art exhibit in the DePaul Club

**5:30-6:30 p.m.:** Witnessing Veterans Stories: A workshop on how to help veterans make the journey home

**7-9 p.m.:** Live performance featuring art created by student veterans and artists, followed by a talkback with veterans

For more information, visit [www.vetartproject.com](http://www.vetartproject.com)