

Report on Warrior Songs Creative Arts Healing Retreat:

December 6th – 10th, 2017 at Siena Center in Racine, Wisconsin

Group Demographics – Who was served?

15 veterans participated in the December 2017 retreat. 7 men and 8 women from all from the Midwest. They represented the Army, Air Force, and Marines and they've served in Vietnam, The Gulf War, Iraq, Afghanistan and various other locations around the world. Ages ranged from 34 – 67, and combined, they provided a total of 102 years of military service. Collectively, they had served a total of 20 combat deployments. There were 5 facilitators, 2 of whom were combat veterans and one was the spouse of a combat veteran.

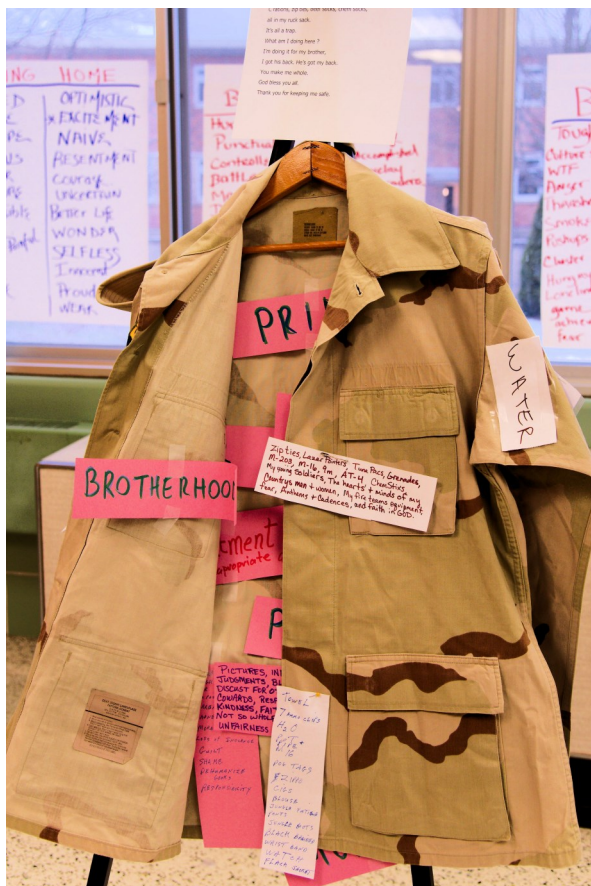


Warrior Songs Retreat Model – How were the veterans served?

The Warrior Songs model is committed to removing all barriers, with the intention of assisting veterans who attend retreats to do so with ease, and with no financial cost involved. The retreat was completely free to the veterans who attended and each veteran was given a travel stipend to assist with travel expenses. The Racine retreat took place Dec. 6 – 10, 2017 at the Siena Center. Comfortable private rooms with private bathrooms were available to all attendees and meals were nutritious and hearty. Veterans were welcomed upon arrival Wednesday afternoon and quickly introduced to other attendees. The first evening included a brief overview and art activity to facilitate introductions and the building of a safe and trusting container. Nearly every veteran attendee spoke of their personal isolation, describing how they needed to push beyond that in order to show up for the retreat. Several reported arriving desperate for connection.

The first 2 full days of the retreat were spent creating art in response to guided activities specifically designed to help participants enter the depths of their trauma and to express resulting feelings through their creations. Topics covered included: initiation into the military, the physical and emotional weight carried during and after deployment, PTSD and how it effects one's life, and how to integrate the experience and trauma and move forward. Each participant had ample opportunity to share and process their story. Staff was always available to veterans who became triggered, and needed one on one processing time.

On the 3rd day, the group transitioned to activities which focused on moving forward, using strengths and tools available to them as they continue the healing journey. The final exercise involved each person setting post retreat personal goals using the insights and discoveries necessary in leading a more connected and integrated life. Several staff members who are trained in meditation and relaxation work presented informative sessions throughout the retreat. These included a simple description of how PTSD causes actual physical changes in the brain, and helpful, practical ways to decrease anxiety and hypervigilance using different breathing and relaxation techniques. Participants reported this as an important piece of the retreat.



Saturday afternoon public event – Trauma Transformed Through Art: A Veteran Art Show

An underlying, but ongoing goal during the retreat was the group working toward a Saturday afternoon community presentation where veterans shared their stories through their art in a public forum. This event had a positive and healing impact on the veterans. It provided a focused “mission”, and allowed them to work both individually, as well as to support one another as a team. Participants spoke about how powerful it felt for them to overcome their fear of publicly expressing the truths they had kept suppressed for so many years. Others expressed elation at finally being heard after feeling silenced, invisible, misunderstood and abandoned by families and communities. Several mentioned how healing it felt to get the stories out and to leave them there, no longer needing to carry the burden of the memories. The facilitators were joined by 3 volunteer support staff who assisted during the art show.

Community –

Our community showed great investment in, and support of, the war healing effort - both financially and by physically showing up to volunteer. Roughly 80 individuals from across the country made monetary contributions. Warrior Songs also received a generous grant from the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs, as well as financial support from: Falmouth Congregational Church UCC (Falmouth, ME) Desert Veterans of Wisconsin, The Bos Meadery (Madison, WI), and Christ the King Lutheran Church (Delafield, WI). Additional material support and in-kind donations came from: Goat Farm Photos, Ready Eddy's flavorful fast sandwiches, and Quilts of Thanks.



Trauma Transformed through Art: A Veteran Art Show was held at the Siena Center. It was attended by approximately 50 people including fellow veterans and many who work with veterans in various outreach capacities. Attendees viewed veteran art displays before and after a live presentation which was emceed by Jason Moon, founder and director of Warrior Songs. During the show veterans shared poems, prose, reflections, art pieces, and a song which was written by the group during the retreat. The audience was visibly moved by the courage and honesty of the veteran participants.

Outcome and Follow Up –

Post retreat feedback has been extremely positive. Veterans report feeling reconnected with their own hearts, their loved ones and with one another. There is always concern among staff that after the retreat the vets will return to old patterns of shutting down and closing the world out as a means of self-protection and survival, which only perpetuates the isolation of PTSD. To help remedy this, a private Facebook group was created so the participants could stay in touch with each other and share their success and growth.

Here is some feedback given by the veterans:

About the art exercises over the weekend? It brought back memories - I think I had pushed down and away those memories for so long, it felt good to get that out - I still have my guard up, but I think I'm opening up more and starting to heal - It made me think that when you put it out on paper, we really did carry a load, brought back lots of memories - It made me see the feelings of others - I thought it was a good way for me to express my emotions which is hard for me to do.



What do you want to do moving forward?

I want to start letting people in, more personal intimacy - I want to focus on letting those emotions out, and feeling more a part of something, being not so uncomfortable around people - I want to focus on being open and staying connected with people - I want to focus on getting better, realizing that I am not to blame for everyone's mistakes - I learned I do have a little voice; I just have to learn how to use it! I'm also trying to believe that I am not alone.

Did you participate in the art show? Yes, I pushed myself to do more than I was comfortable with and feel wonderful about it - Yes, I did. I shared a poem I wrote and my album. It was very empowering - Being an artist is as important as being an engineer.

How can we improve the retreat moving forward? Add an art or painting shop - More art projects - More structured art and a little more direction.

What did you get from this retreat? Confidence, acceptance, love from staff – Friendship - I wouldn't change anything - Having so many people around that I felt unconditional acceptance from. It made it easy to share - I think the most helpful aspect was the veterans, being around other people with similar stories - Co-ed helps me demonize the opposite sex less.

Testimonial

This was an amazing retreat that I was fortunate to attend. WOW! I couldn't have imagined the new tools I would get and the healing that would take place. An awesome organization that helped me feel so welcomed and loved. They have given me a gift to take with me and share with others. Can't thank Jason Moon and his expert, loving staff enough! - Clara Acker (Army)

You can view a video montage of the art which also contains the song written at the retreat at:
www.warriorsongs.org or <https://youtu.be/hSy6wTvmmtE>

Thank you,

Jason Moon—Warrior Songs Founder

