

Catala: Vet Voices program gets underway at TheatreWorks

By Paul Catala

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DAVENPORT — Scott Cook never served in the military, but that hasn't been kept him from using his talents, time and know-how to do his part.

Cook is the artistic producer for TheatreWorks Florida, a professional Central Florida theater company formed in 2007 and based in Davenport. Over the past year and a half, he and his staff have been working to give a literal voice and presence to military war veterans and active service members through creative therapy using music and drama.

Beginning July 14, "Vet Voices: Arts & Health for the Military" begins July 14.

At this point, Cook, 51, said recruitment for the program has begun for the first 30 participants. The program will hopefully nurture life-long healing and learning through the art of live theater and give veterans an opportunity for positive self-awareness and self-discovery in a creative, safe space environment.

The first Vet Voices session for veterans, families and caregivers is scheduled for 1 to 4 p.m., July 14, at TheatreWorks Florida, 8 W. Palmetto St., Davenport.

Cook said it will be a meet-and-greet for veterans.

"For TheatreWorks Florida, it began with the simple need to find a new, underserved, focus group for our highly successful community outreach program, TheatreCares," Cook said. "One day, I Googled 'arts plus military' and suddenly fell down an unexpected rabbit hole of research. This profound 'arts and health in the military' movement was soaring across our country like wildfire and was being supported at the national level."

To get Vets Voices functional, TheatreWorks Florida received a \$10,000 grant in February from the National Endowment for the Arts' Challenge America. The program is also in the middle of a \$25,000 grant review process with USA Today News (Gannett Foundation).

It's a process of coordination and determination, Cook added.

"We just want (veterans) to come to the table and try it and experience the theater arts," he said. "It's important that the vets 'create' the class. It's the vets' agenda and what works for them — it will make it a program, not just a show."

Additionally, Vet Voices' creative partners include the National Initiative for Arts & Health in the Military and Americans for The Arts and NEA Creative Forces. The program has also begun outreach partnerships with James A. Hailey Veterans' Hospital, Tampa and the Lake Nona VA Hospital, Orlando.

Vet Voices is free for military veterans of war, active, retired, reserve and National Guard. For information, call 407-340-0473, theatreworksfl@gmail.com or see www.theatreworksfl.org, TheatreCares section.

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