

'Vet Voices' uses theater to come to veterans' aid



"Vet Voices" is an opportunity for military veterans to share their stories as they learn about creating theater. (Courtesy TheatreWorks Florida)



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JULY 12, 2018, 5:00 AM

TheatreWorks Florida's latest production is quite different than its typical fare of lighthearted musicals. The Davenport-based troupe this week launches "Vet Voices," a free program that will use the theater arts to help military veterans.

"The core of this program is their healing," said Scott Cook, artistic producer of TheatreWorks Florida. "Alternative creative therapy is really what all this is about."

Working with professionals, participants in "Vet Voices" will try their hand at all aspects of making theater: creative writing, acting, music and set design. The end result will be a fully produced original play, developed by

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Funded by a \$10,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, “Vet Voices” is also open to family members and caregivers of veterans.

“I think it will be really cool to see what they can do,” said Cook, who has been working on the program for a year and a half.

Florida has the nation’s third-largest veteran population, according to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. **Polk County**, where TheatreWorks Florida is headquartered, has an estimated 48,000 vets, the department says. Participants are welcome from any Central Florida county; together, an estimated 147,000 veterans live in Orange, Seminole, Osceola and Lake counties.

Using the arts therapeutically — whether through painting, composing music, performing or other creative pursuits — is a growing movement.

“We know that the arts are good for the body and soul,” said Susan Saloom, a Flagler Beach-based field specialist for the National Initiative for Arts & Health in the Military. “They help the brain reorganize and adapt, increase resilience and reduce stress and anxiety.”

Many veterans struggle with elevated anxiety when they return from active duty.

“They have suffered physical and emotional injuries. They have seen things no one should see. They are unable to communicate as they turn their feelings off,” Saloom said. “But when a veteran is involved in the arts, it increases their focus, improves their mood and gives them a sense of accomplishment.”

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The National Initiative for Arts & Health in the Military was established in 2013 by Americans for the Arts, a Washington, D.C.-based advocacy group. Americans for the Arts also coordinates Creative Forces: The NEA Military Healing Arts Network, a joint project of the U.S. Defense Department and the NEA.

Among the 11 sites in the Creative Forces network are the Malcom Randall VA Medical Center in Gainesville, which is pioneering an arts therapy program for rural veterans, and the James A. Haley Veterans’ Hospital in Tampa, which uses arts therapy at its Polytrauma Rehabilitation Center.

Both facilities are researching the use of creative arts in the specific treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury in returning service members.

The Tampa hospital is assisting with “Vet Voices,” as are the Polk County Veterans Council and the National Initiative for Arts & Health in the Military.

In 2017, Cook attended that organization’s national summit in Tampa and was moved by the “utterly amazing weekend of passionate, motivated and inspiring therapeutic clinicians, creative types and military vets and families.”

Established in 2007, Cook’s roving theater company had long run an outreach program called TheatreCares, but taking on a project with the scope of “Vet Voices” only became possible after the troupe established a permanent home in a former Davenport school in late 2017, he said.

Beginning July 14, veterans will use that space at 8 W. Palmetto St. to begin work on their production. Cook says others who are interested will be able to join in after the 14th — he’s aware that working in theater takes a certain amount of courage, different from the bravery found in battle.

“Theater is emotional, theater is truthful,” he said. “That can be hard.”

Participants will not be asked to do anything that makes them uncomfortable, he said.

“We don’t want it to be like going to class. We don’t want to be invasive,” Cook said. “We want to be welcoming.”

For more information, go to theatreworksfl.org, email vetvoices@theatreworksfl.org or call 407-340-0473.

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