

Using the arts, veterans share their stories



A Central Florida program aims to help veterans reintegrate into civilian life through the arts. Called "Vet Voices," it kicks off Saturday.



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When U.S. Army veteran Marielys Camancho-Reyes heard about the “Vet Voices” theater program, she was intrigued. But also a little apprehensive.

“I don’t act, I don’t sing, I don’t dance,” said Camancho-Reyes, who left the Army in 2012 as a staff sergeant. “I thought, ‘I would love to be part of this. I don’t know how, but I want to be part of it.’”

On Saturday, Camancho-Reyes and nine other vets will take to the stage for a free performance, sharing their stories as the culmination of the program’s first installment. Run by TheatreWorks Florida in Davenport, the 10 weeks of “Vet Voices” sessions were funded in part by the National Endowment for the Arts.

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monologues,” Camancho-Reyes said. “We had all

Scott Cook, artistic director of TheatreWorks Florida, said the program was adapted to meet the skills — or lack of skills — of the participants. Spanning six decades in age, the veterans came from the Army, Air Force, Navy and Marines; much like planning a military action, the common goal of putting on a show brought them together.

“I see vets all the same, whether they’re 100 or 18,” said participant Timothy Snipes, a Marines corporal who served from 2005-09. “We’ve fought in different wars or seen different stuff, but we are the same.”

The theater arts helped Snipes and his colleagues open up about difficult experiences.

“For me, it was about finding that outlet. It’s therapeutic,” Snipes said. “I get to express myself in ways I didn’t even know I could.”

Returning to civilian life can be difficult — especially when the armed forces teach members to bury their emotions in the heat of battle.

“It was a very hard transition,” Snipes said. “It still is.”

He volunteered to serve in Iraq.

“My Marine brothers were deploying there, and they were my best friends,” said Snipes, who would survive a plane crash. “I knew I was in a place I needed to be. But it was definitely a bad place.”

At Saturday’s show, which will run less than an hour, he’ll deliver a monologue and also perform with other veterans.

Camacho-Reyes, who is married to a fellow veteran, will speak about military wives in one of her segments.

“They are as much heroes as the soldiers,” she said. “They aren’t on the same mission, but they are fighting the same war.”

Key to the program’s success, Cook said, was creating a “safe space” for the veterans to open up.

“Watching where they have come from on day one to now has been amazing,” he said.

Camacho-Reyes has seen a change in herself.

“If you asked me three months ago, could you do something like this, I would have said no,” she said. “I would never have talked in front of an audience, especially about something so close to my life.”

‘Vet Voices’

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Davenport

► **Cost:** Free

► **Info:** theatreworksfl.org

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