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OUR RETURNING TROOPS

Shakespeare's words heal modern warriors

BY ALLISON CHURCHILL, EDITORIAL ASSISTANT

The Louisville Vet Center, in Kentucky, offers support groups, counseling and employment assistance for veterans. Starting in spring 2016, it added something unexpected: Shakespeare With Veterans.

The group arose from a conversation between Matt Wallace, the producing artistic director of Kentucky Shakespeare, and Fred Johnson, a retired Army colonel. Matt works with a group that uses Shakespeare's plays to help prison inmates develop life skills. Fred, a big fan of the Bard, thought a similar program could help veterans readjust to civilian life. "No one speaks more directly to the warrior's heart than William Shakespeare," he says.

Matt and Fred got rehearsal space at the vet center. Amy Attaway, Kentucky Shakespeare's associate artistic director, took on the role of director and facilitator. Then they got the word out to veterans.

Army combat veteran Cassie Boblitt had tried to push away her experiences in Iraq. She didn't stay in touch with anyone she'd deployed with in 2003. She got an MBA and a job in hotel management. Her hard work enabled her family to buy a nice house. Then in 2014, a neighborhood domestic dispute shattered her sense of security and brought back unsettling memories of Iraq. Cassie had trouble focusing at work. Within a year, she ended her marriage, sold her house and left the corporate world. In 2016, she was diagnosed with PTSD. "I realized no one would understand but fellow veterans," she says. "As soon as I became open to reconnecting to the military, I saw Colonel Johnson's post."

Cassie knew from her first meeting that Shakespeare With Veterans was unique. "I met my best friends that night," she says. "We dug into texts and talked about things we had lost or won or fought for, even knowing we'd lose."

Vietnam veteran Darryl Stewart had been going to Kentucky Shakespeare's summertime performances in the park since 1968. In 2016, he met Amy, who encouraged him to join Shakespeare With Veterans. Darryl had been suffering from a general sense of malaise. "I just hung out in my basement all the time, watching YouTube videos," he says.

At first, Darryl stuck to nonspeaking roles. He liked being Julius Caesar post-assassination, because he got to lie down. Then Amy had him play Caesar in Act I, warning Mark Antony about Cassius. "Darryl was great," Amy says.

Patrick Alexander, who'd deployed to Afghanistan in the early days of the war, says, "I'm not really an acting, Shakespeare kind of guy." He attended his first meeting only at the urging of a mentor at the vet center. "I met Amy, and she was nice. I met Fred, and he was a great guy. And then we became a family."

Patrick still gets nervous onstage, but he shows up for the meeting every week. "It's nice to be around people who just get you," he says.

A typical meeting starts with an opening question that the vets discuss. Next, they do acting exercises to help everyone lose their inhibitions. Then they explore Shakespeare. Amy selects passages she thinks the veterans will relate to. Macbeth struggling to transition from military hero to civilian. Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy on suicide—which claims 22 veterans a day. Shylock's speech asking, "If you prick us, do we not bleed?"

And the group rehearses the play they'll perform for the public. This summer it will be *Henry IV*. They do a big performance in Louisville's Central Park, plus smaller shows for schools or other veterans groups.

"Sometimes we're silly, and sometimes it's cathartic," says Cassie. "It's all just words on paper until we apply it to our experience. That's when we understand the true emotions."

Nothing resonates with these veterans (who together represent the Marine Corps, Army, Air Force and Navy, junior enlisted to senior officers) quite like the St. Crispin's Day battle speech in *Henry V*: "But we in it shall be remembered— / We few, we happy few, we band of brothers; / For he today that sheds his blood with me / shall be my brother . . ." (Act IV, Scene iii).

Sentiments a vet well understands. Cassie recalls finding out, the night before entering Iraq from Kuwait, that her former battalion had been attacked. "These were people I'd seen every day in the motor pool, friends who'd lived across the hall in the barracks," Cassie says. "I was terrified." But she put on a brave face for her new unit.

"When you're in a bunker with three guys, that's your whole world," says Darryl. "You've got one thing in combat: the people around you. Not your country or your family, just those guys."

"Even if it's not looking good, you go into battle to honor the men and women next to you," Cassie says.

Now the members of Shakespeare With Veterans have each other. "We had a new guy come. Afterward he said, 'I can't believe I talked!'" Darryl says. "He'd been going to support groups and just listening, but here he felt comfortable enough to join the conversation."

Inspired by the Shakespeare group, Darryl took a writing course at the vet center. His story about a little girl he met in Vietnam was published in two books.

Cassie founded Mindful Movement, through which she leads yoga workshops (including at the vet center). "I'm finally coming into my life," she says. "Shakespeare With Veterans gave me the support

I needed.”

Patrick, now a counselor at the vet center, helps recruit for the group. “We can get isolated, until we understand other people have had the same experience,” he says. “In Shakespeare With Veterans, we talk about combat and what life was like before and after war. And we also do Shakespeare.”

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