

Report on Warrior Songs Creative Arts Retreat:
November 6th – 10th, 2013 at Immaculate Heart Retreat Center in Spokane, WA.

Group Demographics – Who was served?

Eleven veterans participated in the Nov. 2013 retreat. Eight were male and 3 female, 9 were from the Spokane area, 1 was from the SF Bay area, and one from Las Vegas NV. Two of the veterans were Native American, and one was born in the Philippines. They represented the Army, Navy Air Force and Marines and they've served in Viet Nam, The Gulf War, Iraq, Afghanistan and various other locations around the world. Ages ranged from 27 – 67, and combined, they provided a total of 54 years of military service. One remains active in the Reserves. There were 7 facilitators, 3 of whom were veterans.

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 (transportation, child care, dog kenneling, etc. are covered as needed.)

The Spokane retreat took place Nov. 6 – 10, 2013 at the Immaculate Heart Retreat Center. Comfortable private rooms were available to all attendees and meals were nutritious and hearty. Veterans were welcomed upon arrival Wed. 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 trusted 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. 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 breathe 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.

Saturday evening community event – THE WELCOME: A Public Listening

An underlying, but ongoing goal during the retreat was the group working toward a Saturday evening 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 hidden for years. Others expressed elation at finally being heard after feeling silenced, invisible, misunderstood and abandoned by families and communities. And 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 memory.

Community –

The Warrior Songs retreat is one event in a series of 4 war healing events that took place in Spokane between Aug. and Nov. The other 3 involved opportunities for the community to learn more about war and its effects on our veterans, their families and our communities in general. The community of Spokane showed great investment in, and support of, the war healing effort - both financially and by physically showing up to volunteer. Roughly 55 individuals and businesses made monetary contributions, and over 30 people volunteered many hours and great effort to the cause.

The Welcome event on the last evening of the retreat marked the 4th event in this series. It was held at the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Spokane and was attended by approximately 180 members of the Spokane community. There were several representatives from the Spokane VAMC present, as well as others who work with veterans in various outreach capacities, including substance abuse, homelessness and Wounded Warriors. 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 and a song which was written by the group during the retreat. The audience was visibly moved by the courage, and wisdom of the participants.

The First Presbyterian Church of Spokane provided a 15 passenger van and a driver to transport vets and staff from the retreat center to the UU Church and back.

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 death grip of PTSD. Because of this concern, the decision was made to intentionally include a local therapist to help staff the Spokane retreat so that veterans can remain in community for follow up, support and

conversation after the rest of the team has left the area. The Spokane therapist has already begun meeting regularly with the 3 female veteran attendees, and with the group as a whole.

A bridge call will be held via a toll free conference call line on Dec. 5th, and other calls will be scheduled as needed. Warrior Songs continues to have a local representative in Spokane who will be available to help coordinate and cultivate other veteran activities as the need and desire arises from the veterans.

Below are several comments from participants.

The Warrior Songs Retreat helped me tell a story that until recently only a precious few people inside my tightest circles were privy to--that I had spent a decade trying to bury and forget. Until that point, I had never picked up a paintbrush, and was blown away by what I was able to create, without even trying and having no training whatsoever. Something inside me had changed, for the good, forever. When I returned home from the retreat, my wife immediately recognized that my eyes were clearer, I had more bounce in my step, and a massive burden had been lifted from my shoulders. I discovered that in painting I had the perfect way to put memories down on canvas, in order to get the bad feelings out of my soul. Jessie, Iraq War Veteran