

Report on Warrior Songs Creative Arts Retreat:  
June 19th - 23rd, 2013 at Pendle Hill in Wallingford, PA.

**Group Demographics - Who was served?**

A total of 20 people participated in the June 19th - 23rd, 2013 Warrior Songs Creative Arts Retreat at Pendle Hill in Wallingford, PA. Fourteen were veteran participants who had served various branches of the military in Viet Nam, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Turkey, Bahrain, Spain, Germany, Iraq, Afghanistan and more. Seven were female and 7 male. Several had survived suicide attempts, many struggled with alcohol and substance addictions, and one was currently homeless. They came from CA, WA, PA, NY, DE, WI and NC. The 6 facilitators consisted of 3 veterans and 3 civilians with backgrounds in art therapy, counseling, meditation, and massage therapy, all of whom had numerous years experience working with veterans.

**Warrior Songs Retreat Model - How were they served?**

The Warrior Songs retreat was designed on the belief that art is medicine. Originating from a soul level, art has the capacity to reach others in an equally deep place. It allows the artist to mine their body, heart and mind discovering otherwise unaccessible memories, inviting residual effects of past experiences to the surface and into the light. Art helps to transform past trauma into that which is expressive, allowing it to be examined and refined into something beautiful which can then be given as a gift.

Trust, which is often an issue for veterans was established quickly and deep sharing began as early as the first evening. During the course of the four days a powerful bond continued to grow around the wound of having seen and done unimaginable things in the name of war.

Participants were guided through 3 unique, structured experiences using various art forms which became a gateway to sharing stories and experiences. There were also 3-8 foot canvases available throughout the retreat which transformed into living murals depicting life before deployment, during deployment and since returning. An ample amount of art supplies were available to participants around the clock for the duration of the retreat.

Two songs and numerous poems and letters were written. The murals were filled, and clay took various shapes as broken hearts opened and pain poured out.

A massage therapist was available for body work, and plenty of down time was available for participants to work on art or to spend time on the beautiful grounds of Pendle Hill integrating the healing work.

On Saturday evening, June 22nd veteran participants presented a Veteran Art Show and Presentation in the Barn at Pendle Hill. About 25 members from the surrounding community attended. Veterans gifted the audience with a powerful evening of song, story and poetry, depicting war trauma transformed into art.

Each participant worked on developing personal goals and refining specific action plans to help with readjustment to everyday life. These goals were shared with the group in a commitment ceremony.

## **Outcome -**

The overall feeling among both staff and participants was that the retreat was a great success. Veterans reported feeling reconnected with their own hearts and with one another. They have remained in contact via phone calls and email. A bridge call on July 18th will provide a follow up and check in regarding goal setting and reconnection for the entire group.

Below are several comments from participants.

To my fellow participants, though I can't name you for reason of confidentiality - thank you for sharing your broken hearts and truth with me. It's been over 40 years since my return from the conflict in Vietnam, and for the first time I've felt acceptance among my peers. I feel that my isolation, failed relationships and sketchy career have been vindicated in the truth telling of our stories, my experiences have been validated. Now I am free to speak my truth and accept my place as "elder", no longer a pariah.

- Ray, Vietnam War Veteran

No words can express the gratitude I feel for being able to participate in the first Warrior Song Healing Retreat last week at Pendle Hill in Philadelphia. In the presence of other veterans whose hearts have been so badly broken by participating in the immoral, unAmerican wars our nation sends us to my heart began to heal as it hasn't been able to in the 45 years since I returned from Vietnam. Being with my brothers and sisters, some my age, some as young as my own children, and having our stories set to music by the magnificent Jason Moon, having our stories expressed in art and shared with civilians who found the strength within themselves to bear witness to the soul wounds of America's wars, and being in the sure hands of the brilliant, gifted, focused and similarly wounded counselors who make up the Warrior Song team was one of the greatest blessings of my life. (Seeing that team in action brought the special pleasure of witnessing a great sports team or acting ensemble or musical consort. Sheer joy!) The healing energy of this extraordinary experience was truly holy. It was as though I had been reunited with beloved siblings whom I hadn't expected to see again in this life.

Godspeed to Warrior Song! You are blazing a trail that our nation and our world desperately needs to have blazed. I will continue to follow and do everything I can to help you in your sacred mission. Thank you from the bottom of my heart. God bless you. With love and deep respect, Larry, Vietnam War Veteran

I make it there to Warrior Songs. Then, "it" happens. The anxiety melts away. People are smiling and laughing, and I even get a hug. I haven't had one of those in years. I sit down and a stranger starts talking to me. Then we start telling war stories about countries we have been to, and another person joins in. "do you remember eating Chicken Tava?" "Oh yes, it was wonderful." The conversation melts away insecurity walls as we discuss the menus of foreign countries we have all served in.

The next thing you know we are in a circle and listening to Jason Moon sing and our hearts open up to a fellow wounded soul, we know he walks among the wounded. We who still live yet hold such heavy hearts. Day one, some people open up, like a rose unfolding a tight bud. Day two, more petals unfold, a fragrant aroma filling the room and smiles come easily in circle. Day three, petals in full glory as God intended with color splendidly caressing the hearts and souls. Day four no one can keep from reaching for God's creation and smelling deeply and touching the velvety softness of the petals. Day five ... OUCH the thorn ... we must leave our safe haven, yet we have come through the valley of the shadow of death where God Himself sat next to each of us for days and prepared a table for us in the presence of our enemy PTSD, and filled our cups until they ran full and flowing again!

I left Warrior Songs with such a peace that when I returned home and saw my sister, and my shrink. I didn't even have to say, "I did such and such" because I was glowing like Moses when he came down from the mountain after visiting with God. They SAW the difference in me before I even opened my mouth. Lt Colonel (retired) Kimberly Heartsong