



# Opportunities for Expression

## *Art in the Gardens*

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*Washington NC- Surrounded by a river of rock, an arbor stands resolute in our Rose Haven Center of Healing. Its four timbers support a segmented metal sheet that hangs from the arbor's ribs. Attached are clay-fired face masks and one set of clay hands— of disabled American Veterans. The sheet sways gently in a late afternoon breeze, giving the masks a sense of movement. This kinetic motion seems to outwardly express the dynamic undercurrents of ongoing programs at Pamlico Rose. The Center, located in the historic district of Washington, NC, began offering programs to help Veterans in 2019. Our mission is to advance wellness and resilience among Veterans, with a current emphasis on serving female Veterans.*

### **Art-Making**

Art-making reveals the core of an artist. The brushstrokes of color and shape and the molding of clay are just examples of the representation of feelings and emotions that make up “self.” Making art is a conduit of that which cannot be told in simple conversation: beauty too beautiful to explain,

story that resists the pen, experiences that reverberate in the recesses of the mind and the soul. Art-making is a kinetic and emotional pathway to memories. This pathway creates opportunity to retell meaningful stories and experiences that retain relevance to the artist, while controlling how that story or experience is retold. Art-making fosters an effective means to express and share what is meaningful in people's lives. “Art does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes visible,” wrote Paul Klee.

The benefits of art-making cross generations and contribute importantly to wellness and healthy living for those artistically talented as well as those with modest ability. Art-making promotes mindfulness, reduces anxiety and stress, and counteracts depression, not to mention fostering the unbridled joy of creating. When overcoming the self-consciousness of making art with others, especially for those adults who shy away from public interaction, or the for the elderly who tend to shut themselves away, art therapist Raquel Stephenson sees opportunity for growing connectivity. “When people take the risk of making art with others, it builds community, which is therapeutic. Making art allows this community-building to happen quickly and more powerfully,” she says.

## Veterans and Art

Living men and women Veterans span eighty years and four wars and numerous conflicts. Many still carry with them injuries to body and mind caused by trauma experienced during their service. These injuries stay with them as active military and long after their service is over. There is now more attention to these impacts on the Veteran, more research given the kinds of trauma, and more understanding of the kind of behaviors that result from the trauma than when the Vietnam era Vets came home, struggling with the trauma of war and society's disregard for their condition.

"Veterans use artful pathways and passages as opportunities of expression and a means to tell their stories of combat and their other service-related experiences," says Debra Torrence, Arts of the Pamlico Executive Director. "Art-making also connects them with a community of peers and strengthens [their] sense of self," she adds." Art therapy is one of several alternative therapies, such as writing, music, and dancing, that research suggests can be an effective partner with traditional medical practices in treating PTSD/trauma. For female Veterans whose trauma can also be the result of military sexual trauma, art therapy and art-making hold the same promise.

Alternative therapies provide avenues to consider and express the trauma at least in the beginning, as Joshua Smyth writes "... without necessarily having to verbalize the trauma, share this verbalizing with others, or directly confront the trauma, if they are not ready." Working with art, Veterans can express feelings and concerns while seeking resolution from lingering painful memories. Making art can also manage intense anxiety and stress that can grip the Veteran like a vice. Art therapy creates a safe place and the canvas or other media bolsters that feeling of safety. Finally, art therapy and art-making overall can go about helping rebuild self-esteem and reaffirm a positive sense of self-worth, especially if the experience of trauma involves moral injury or survivor's guilt. Kurt Vonnegut sagely wrote that "the primary benefit of practicing any art, whether well or badly, is that it enables one's soul to grow."



## Veteran Art on the Pamlico

Over the last two years, a groundswell of efforts to engage the arts and explore benefits to Veterans have been made by Washington, NC nonprofits Pamlico Rose and Arts of the Pamlico. As part of their annual Healing Vets Weekend, Pamlico Rose sponsors a Military Veteran (and active service) Art Exhibit hosted by the Turnage Theatre. The exhibit opens on the Friday of the Healing Vets Weekend and runs for four weeks. The 3rd Annual Healing Vets Weekend is slated for May 1 and 2, 2020.



Arts of the Pamlico and Pamlico Rose sponsored the first year of a Veteran art program through a 2019 grant from the Veteran Support Foundation. Drawing on the mentorship of local artists, six Vietnam-era Veterans and one World War II Veteran from Disabled American Veterans (DAV) Chapter #48 created plaster face masks made from a mold of their own face, while one Veteran shaped plaster hands. The Veterans sketched and painted a design onto the canvas of tin that would eventually serve as the backing for the mask. "I liked the face mask project," said Pat Ryan, a participating Veteran. "The image, whether playful or serious, was a mindful pause to consider where you are in life." She added, "Like other art, it helps people express feelings they can't or don't feel comfortable talking about, including hidden fears." The masks were later fired and attached to the tin backing and were connected. The collection, titled "Opportunities of Expression," was part of the 2019 Healing Veteran Art Exhibit opening. In October, Opportunities for Expression had their second exhibit opening at its permanent home in the Rose Haven Center of Healing Betty Sands Memorial Gardens.



**Plaster Molds were made to fit each of the Veterans faces**



**Each Veteran also decorated the background of their mask in order to represent something about**

**The Opportunities for expression art dedication ceremony.**



## Art in the Gardens

The Betty Sands Memorial Gardens served as an art-making venue as part of the initial Total Life Fitness Retreat for female Veterans, October 4-6, 2019. Two sessions of the three-day retreat were devoted to artistic activities. Retreatants bestowed the Center with twin rain barrels carrying the expressive and meaningful messages of seven women Veterans, reflecting the strength of that first cohort to confront the effects of shared experience from their time in the military and of being a female Veteran. More importantly, for those Veterans, the group art-making represented community. For several, the retreat was an opportunity to meet and spend time with female Veterans over an extended period.

A second TLF retreat is scheduled for March 6-8, 2020. A TLF retreat with an art focus is planned for April 3-5, 2020.



*During the first TLF Retreat participants painted two rain barrels under the guidance of an art therapist.*



*The two completed rain barrels will remain an essential part of the garden for years to come.*

## More Art

The Gardens hosted the first Garden pARTy on November 3rd featuring local artists exhibiting and selling their work. The 3rd Annual Healing Vets Weekend (May 1 and 2, 2020) will again feature a Military Veteran Art Exhibit that will also be open to active service members. The exhibit will open May 1 and will run for a month.



*A local artist and a band from the community featured at the Garden pARTy*



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