

# Serving Those Who Have Served: Creative Arts for Veterans

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper discusses Creative Arts for Veterans (CAV), a program launched in 2021 to connect veterans across the state of Indiana with the healing power of the arts. A collaboration between the Sidney and Lois Eskenazi Museum of Art, the Indiana University Center for Rural Engagement, and various community veteran and arts partners, Creative Arts for Veterans utilizes therapeutically informed arts-based approaches to assist veterans and their families in promoting general health and wellbeing. The origins of the pilot project, new adaptations and directions for programming, the overall approach to the program, program goals, and specific examples of programming are discussed.*

## INTRODUCTION

Transitioning from almost 30 years of active-duty military service to becoming a civilian, Todd Burkhardt, Director of Campus Partnerships at the Indiana University Center for Rural Engagement, struggled with finding a sense of purpose and in many ways felt alienated. During this time

of transition, Lauren Daugherty, Arts-based Wellness Experiences manager and art therapist at the Sidney and Lois Eskenazi Museum of Art at Indiana University Bloomington, invited Todd and a group of Center for Rural Engagement staff to an open studio wellness experience (Figure 1). Todd had not engaged with art since high school but was drawn to the intentionality of artmaking because of this experience. He found it was a way he could express himself through nonverbal means and lessened some of the difficult feelings he was experiencing during this time of transition. He thought, “if art can somehow assist me, maybe it could also assist other veterans who are struggling.”

Indiana ranks 16th in the nation in veteran population size, and many veterans in the state reside in rural communities that may not have adequate access to mental health care or other forms of support in promoting their well-being. Managing the mental and emotional stress of a demanding workload, deployments, uncertainty, combat experiences, and the commonly upheld values of stoicism, stability, and endurance present in the military profession, with that of new and changing career and family dynamics upon returning to civilian life can be overwhelming. Veterans and their families need tools to address these concerns.

The arts are one way to support veterans who are dealing with these and other stressors.

Art therapy has been found to effectively assist veterans in identifying and expressing internal thoughts and emotions, developing a sense of safety, and fostering improved communication



**Figure 1. Todd Burkhardt, Director of Campus Partnerships at the Indiana University Center for Rural Engagement uses a purple marker to fill in a pre-drawn mandala during a wellness workshop at the Eskenazi Museum of Art.**

leading to improved interpersonal relationships (Jones, Drass & Kaimal, 2019). With these benefits of art therapy in mind, Lauren and Todd developed Creative Arts for Veterans (CAV), a program promoting general health and wellbeing for veterans and their families across the state by connecting them with the healing power of the arts. In early 2021, the program launched with a pilot 8-week virtual art therapy group held synchronously with an in-person location at the Elks Lodge in Rushville, Indiana, for those with limited internet access. Participants ranged from their mid-thirties to early fifties and had served in the Army or Marines. They were all veterans of either the war in Iraq or Afghanistan or both.

Seventy percent of those that participated were women.

Participants were mailed art kits with all art supplies necessary to successfully participate in the group. Participants engaged in thinking routine exercises with works of art from the Eskenazi Museum collection, created their own works of art using art supplies such as air-dry clay, oil pastels, and colored pencils and shared their experiences with one another verbally. The group served as a



**Figure 2. Lauren Daugherty cuts out a magazine image to use as collage material for an affirmation trading card.**

way to expose veterans to different art mediums they may not have used before. Some veterans favored certain art materials and reported they bought more of those specific materials to use

on their own in between sessions and after the conclusion of the group experience. Regardless of location, participants in this pilot program reported a decrease in isolation and an increase in their ability to identify and regulate emotions following the series. Participants also reported strong desires to meet in person and to have fewer sessions with longer time frames for artmaking and discussion.

A major success of this pilot program was its ability to reach women veterans. Women make up 7% of Indiana's veteran population and account for 20% of current U.S. military members. Women veterans in rural communities are often even more isolated and marginalized than their male counterparts, making reaching women veterans a necessary component of CAV programming. According to *Military Times* magazine, "Four out of five wounded women veterans reported feelings of loneliness, isolation, and disconnect from their peers." (Shane, 2021). Several factors can account for this isolation and disconnect in disabled female veterans and non-disabled female veterans as well. *Social Work Today* reports female veterans can struggle with their mental health due to sexual assaults that occur during their time in the service, can experience social bias about being away from the home for deployments, and other traumas (Dripchak, n.d.). While conceptualizing the pilot art therapy group, Todd and Lauren were connected to Melissa Bellanceau, a retired Marine who recently completed her master's degree in social work and found peace in creating art following her military retirement. Utilizing a grassroots approach, Melissa was able to help Todd and Lauren recruit women veterans in her community for this initial program.

Based on feedback from participants in the pilot group, Todd and Lauren began to think about how they could shift from an art therapy approach to

an arts-based wellness model with more emphasis on community engagement with local veteran and arts organizations. The changes made following the initial art therapy pilot group reflect participant feedback and observations from Todd and Lauren. Moving away from the telehealth model and prioritizing in-person programming was a major change made in the program, reflecting participants' strong desire to meet in person. In addition, Lauren noticed the members of the group that met in person at the Elks Lodge in Rushville, Indiana, for this pilot group due to lack of internet access at their home appeared to have a stronger bond as evidenced by the amount of support they gave one another verbally before, during, and after each group. In-person programming would allow all members of a group to develop stronger bonds and support one another in ways that telehealth does not allow. Another major change was the shift from an 8-week group model to one-day experiences. Following the pilot group, Todd and Lauren discussed possible reasons for a few participants not attending more than one group meeting or coming for a portion of the 8-week group and not returning. While these participants did not provide feedback about this, other group members reported they had a desire to meet less often but for longer periods of time. Because of this feedback, Todd and Lauren speculated that the 8-week group model could have been too much of a commitment for participants. A workshop model would allow participants an introduction to art-based approaches to support their mental well-being without too much of a time commitment.

The initial program has grown into a catalog of options that include one-day or partial-day workshops, presentations, and family-focused events to support reintegration with a holistic approach. All events utilize therapeutically informed arts-based approaches in community-based settings that are co-developed with partner

organizations. Considering the interests of each community organization and information the organizations know about the veterans in their communities, Lauren tailors art-making experiences to fit specific needs, making each iteration of a CAV program unique. While Lauren facilitates the artmaking experiences, Todd attends each CAV program as a participant, providing feedback that allows for continual improvement in the overall program, methodologies, and art-based wellness experiences. Todd also believes that artmaking plays a vital role in his mental health and wellbeing and can provide a firsthand account of his experiences with various art media to veterans that might be hesitant to engage fully in the artmaking processes offered. Art-making experiences use a variety of art materials to meet the specific needs of each group.

In the fall of 2021, CAV partnered with the Center for Veteran and Military Students at Indiana University Bloomington to provide an arts-based experience. Participants ranged in age from early twenties to early thirties and had served in the Army or were currently serving in the Indiana National Guard. Some participants had multiple combat deployments to Iraq or Afghanistan, and a few had not deployed yet. Participants in this group were mostly male. The art-based wellness event focused on the Japanese art of Kintsugi. Kintsugi is the art of repairing broken pottery with gold. The philosophy and process treat breakage and repair as part of the history of an object and something that should be celebrated rather than something to disguise. Participants in the program broke a ceramic object and glued the pieces back together with epoxy and gold mica powder to replicate the gold used in the traditional Japanese art form. During artmaking, the group shared military stories and experiences, engaged in discussion about visible and hidden wounds, and connected their experiences as veterans with the Kintsugi

process and philosophy. Each veteran's experience is unique, containing specific struggles, setbacks, challenges, and triumphs. The process of Kintsugi epitomizes this by bringing awareness to and celebrating the beauty in imperfection.

In January of 2022, CAV partnered with Vet2Vet, a nonprofit organization based in Vigo County to host an initial arts-based experience for members of a monthly veteran support group.

Participants were all male and ranged in age from late thirties to late seventies. They had served in the Army, Marines, or Air Force and many had deployments to Vietnam, Iraq, or Afghanistan. Others had deployments to Kuwait. The group began by looking at and talking about a work of

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art by a veteran artist in the Eskenazi Museum's collection, *Bird Watcher* (1941) by John Graham. An image of the work of art can be found using the Eskenazi Museum's Collections Online resource. Graham was a veteran of World War I where he served as a cavalry officer for the Russian Imperial Army. Several participants responded to the colors in the image stating they reflected feelings of anger, anxiety, and turmoil, while other participants more generally related the image to their experiences seeing injured soldiers in combat or other components of their time deployed overseas. Some responded to the flatness of the figure depicted in the image connecting the flat facial features to

numbness or voids present in their current lives. Participants questioned the intention of the artist stating they wondered if this image was reflective of his internal state because of his time in the service. Following the looking exercise, participants created affirmation trading cards using collage and other 2D materials (Figure 2). The cards consisted of positive messages of support they could share with another veteran or keep for themselves. Using collage in therapeutically informed art-based groups can be especially beneficial when working with a wide range of ages and abilities. "The art materials of glue, magazine images, and scrap paper are generally accessible, and many people are able to cut, tear, and adhere selected images to complete a collage" (Chilton & Scotti, 2014, p.163). Working in collage also allows for the creation of metaphors through the imagery selected, often leading to new insights or discoveries about a certain situation or experience (Chilton & Scotti, 2014).

After this art wellness event, Stacy Birk, M.S.W., Vet2Vet Director stated, "CAV provided an inspiring art activity that opened up the thinking process of how we deal with trauma. This program provides another outlet for our Veteran population to learn coping skills when dealing with trauma from the past alongside current stressors in their life. It was amazing to see the interaction between the creative arts team and the veterans who attended the Coffee and Chat Peer Group. It was a positive experience that focuses on how to use art as an outlet for emotional issues." Art materials and instructions on how to replicate this activity were left with Vet2Vet facilitators to use in additional support groups forming in other counties across the state. Todd and Lauren are currently working to connect Vet2Vet with a local arts organization that can provide additional arts-based programming.

In April of 2022, CAV partnered with the Indiana Department of Veterans Affairs for its Women Veterans Wellness Retreat which was held at the Abe Martin Lodge at Brown County State Park. Participants were all female and ranged in age from early thirties to late sixties. They served in the Army, Navy, Marines, or Air Force and many had combat deployments to Iraq or Afghanistan. Katy Wagner, an art therapy graduate student at Herron School of Art and Design developed and led this program alongside Todd. The group used an array of textiles, embellishments, and military-inspired materials to create personalized mixed-media collages. The surface used was a 14 inch cardboard round chosen to represent wholeness. The art experience was an opportunity to play, explore, and create in a supportive group setting. A study conducted in 2011 by Ann Futterman Collier found that women that worked often in textiles such as fiber making, sewing, or quilting, reported improved moods. While the group did not sew or quilt, this activity served as an introduction to working with textiles, a new art medium that many had not worked with before. The goal of each CAV program is not only to serve as a point of connection amongst participants but to introduce different forms of art-making in hopes that participants will continue making art after the events conclude. There was a lot of positive feedback from veterans about this event that ranged from: "It was wonderful being with fellow women veterans," to "I needed a getaway, some time to quiet my mind from the issues and concerns at home and the world. I could go to my/a happy place!" and "Connected to my inner peace. Thank you."

After multiple iterations of art programming for and with veterans, the sense of connectedness and community across veterans cannot be overstated. Conversations were light-hearted, often about

family or learning about each other's time in the service. These wellness experiences provided a venue not only to engage with various art modalities but to connect with their veteran brothers and sisters. Commonalities were easily found with other veterans. Regardless of their military occupational skill (job), where they were stationed, or what branch of service or years they had served in, they have shared lived experience. Because of this experience, there is implicit trust and veterans share war stories, triumphs, and struggles with other veterans. Our hope is that through these events, those veterans share contact information with each other to remain connected and continue developing bonds with each other

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**Figure 3. Veterans design various personalized textile, mixed-media collages.**

Upcoming programs in the late spring and summer of 2022 include several partnerships with horse stables, including Anam Cara Stables in LaPorte, Indiana, and People and Animal Learning Services and Lauren will be co-facilitating programs with

equine-assisted psychotherapists to connect arts-based wellness activities like the ones mentioned previously with the healing presence of horses to promote a sense of safety, connection, and resiliency among the veterans who participate.

Working with horses in a therapeutic way with trained facilitators "heals and integrates the brain, develops self-awareness and self-regulation, and empowers people to build the kinds of relationships we all need" (Doran, 2021). By working with horses, individuals gain knowledge of how to build relationships that they can then transfer to their daily lives (Doran, 2021).

The artmaking portion of these experiences will focus on using tactile 3D materials like recycled military uniforms to create large-scale weavings and natural materials to create mandalas focusing on ideas of transformation, impermanence, and letting go. Mandalas have been found to improve mood, specifically drawing or creating within the circle shape. Rather than using pre-drawn mandala patterns, participants in these programs will be creating their own patterns within a circle using natural materials (sticks, rocks, flowers, leaves, etc.) to form their mandalas (Campenni and Hartman, 2019). Utilizing these tactile materials as well as having other tactile experiences such as using fabric to weave or create collages has the ability to stimulate specific regions of the brain that can help treat trauma (Homer, 2015)

While Lauren will lead these initial arts-based wellness experiences, the goal of CAV is to connect interested organizations like Vet2Vet with community arts organizations or other arts professionals in their communities to continue arts-based programming. These arts organizations will provide programming based on their area of expertise, which could include music, visual art, drama, creative writing, and other artistic media, to expose veterans to different art modalities, providing a sense of connection, and establishing a supportive environment where veterans can express themselves. Since future programs will not always be led by a trained art therapist or other mental health professionals, it is also a goal

to provide toolkits to community organizations hosting programs with mental health resources and guidance on what to do should a veteran need to seek additional professional help. As Creative Arts for Veteran programming expands, Lauren and Todd plan to utilize the resources at Indiana University to allow graduate art therapy students or students in other disciplines to lead arts-based groups, find community partner connections, and provide other general program support.



Creative Arts for Veterans is a notable example of the ways we can activate resources shared across Indiana—including higher education, state and local programs, and nonprofits—to improve the lives of rural residents who have dedicated their service to our country.

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