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How a Norfolk Writing Center is Helping Members of the Military Find Their Muse

August 22, 2019

By Rebecca Sutton



Men and women with military backgrounds participate in a Write Where You Are event at the Fort Story Library in Virginia. Write Where You Are is The Muse Writers Center's free program for older adults living in healthcare facilities, at-risk youth, and service members and veterans. Photo courtesy of The Muse Writers Center

Home to Navy, Air Force, Army, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard facilities, Virginia's Hampton Roads area boasts one of the largest military communities in the nation. This was evident at **The Muse Writers Center** in Norfolk, where Executive Director Michael Khandelwal estimates that at least a third of the center's students come from military backgrounds. Some are active duty service members or veterans, while others are married to a service member or were raised by someone in the military. "This is who our community is," said Khandelwal. "We needed to be responsive to that."

And responsive they have been. With support from the National Endowment for the Arts, The Muse has created a new military component of its Write Where You Are initiative, which also holds free workshops for older adults living in senior facilities and at-risk youth. Write Where You Are invites service members and veterans to participate in one-day writing seminars and six-week workshops, the latter of which culminate in public readings where participants can share their work. All activities are free-of-charge, and are offered at the writing center itself, as well as at military installations to help eliminate barriers to participation.

"Families who are in the military make a lot of sacrifices," Khandelwal said. "It's totally reasonable that we would make sacrifices for them and create programs that have no cost, and that give them another outlet. That's the least we could do."

Write Where You Are offers the military community a variety of genres to explore, including memoir, fiction, poetry, screenwriting, and songwriting. While the program is not meant to be art therapy, the process of self-expression can prove empowering and healing nonetheless, and The Muse takes care to create a safe space where all can write and share without judgement, particularly for those working through wartime trauma. For those with little prior experience with writing, Khandelwal is hopeful that the program will open up a new appreciation for the transformative ways the arts can channel emotion and reframe experiences.

"I hope [participants] see another avenue for themselves in terms of their lives and expression," Khandelwal said. "I want them to see that this is a legitimate way of expressing themselves, that the arts are a way that they can both thrive and heal and engage the world."

While writing is certainly the main component of Write Where You Are's military program, sharing this work with the wider community can be equally meaningful for both participants and audience members. "Sharing your personal story, first of all, helps the person who's telling the story to get that story out," said Khandelwal. "Just in talking about something that might have been either buried or at least slightly submerged gives a person some freedom. And [when you] hear someone else tell their story, you can identify with them and see 'Oh, maybe the feelings I have are valid. Maybe the contradictory things that are in my mind are contradictory in everyone's mind.'"

By revealing these types of shared experiences, emotions, and reactions, Khandelwal believes the program is able to bring people closer together and build a stronger sense of community—a common thread he sees among all art forms, not just the literary arts. "The arts are what makes a community vital and thriving," Khandelwal said. "[What's the point] if life is only about the getting-through-life parts, and there's not a moment where you can express your soul and see others express theirs and find artistic connection? What's the point if there's nothing beautiful for you to enjoy?"

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





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