

Veteran's Health Equity Podcast Transcript

Using Arts to Heal

>> I want to welcome everyone and thank you all for joining. My name is Lauren Korshak and I lead translation activities for V.A.'s Office of Health Equity. The Office of Health Equity champions the advancement of health equity and the reduction of health disparities in veterans.

My job means that I get to tell stories about the data we have on veterans and their health. Today on the Health Equity and Veterans podcast series, we'll be discussing how art can be used to help veterans heal from trauma and be a powerful visual representation of equity. But before we begin, I want to introduce our speaker.

Maggs Vibo is a writer, scholar, and veteran who served as a Sergeant in the United States Army. She deployed to Iraq in 2003, where her unit, attached to the XVIII Airborne Corps, earned a Presidential Unit Citation. Her work has been anthologized in over a dozen print publications, including those published by Oxford Brookes Poetry Centre, the Veterans Writing Workshop, and the Veterans Writing Project. Throughout two decades, she shared her journey as a military veteran and officer's spouse in print, broadcasts, special events, Glitch Media, and online and 3D exhibitions in many countries throughout the world.

You can find her pieces at [MaggsVibo--M-A-G-G-S-V-I-B-O-- dot com](http://MaggsVibo--M-A-G-G-S-V-I-B-O--dot.com).

So as we begin, I want to ask, what do you think is important for me and everyone listening to know about you?

>> What you should know about me is I'm a veteran myself. So lots of coffee and happiness from my DD214. I'm a military spouse; he's on his 26th year of service. So that's lots of early mornings, lots of multiples of tape measures, curtains for various houses that we've lived in, moving stickers of all shades and colors all over the furniture. And I'm an artist, and that's what I'd like to focus on in this podcast because it's helped me in immeasurable ways with the other two points that I first brought up.

So, military life -- it isn't for everybody. It isn't easy. Like some of my fellow OIF vets and fellow military spouses, I missed out on a lot. So birthdays, holidays, graduations, births, funerals, time with family. I think I once went eight years without physically seeing my parents. And in that time, I know a lot of us have learned some good or important lessons throughout the two decades of war.

We learned about the devastating impact that war inflicted on our troops, our families, the people of Iraq and Afghanistan, and other places of conflict. We started talking more about White Star families because of death by suicides. And then I had to reconcile all of those feelings about conflict. And by doing that, I created a lot of different types of work. And I started taking care of my behavioral health, communicating with my family and friends, and then thinking about myself as an artist and a writer for my community.

And all of that's been a really big process. It started in, I want to say, 2004. I read a book; it was called War and the Soul - Healing Our Nation's Veterans from PTSD. It's by Edward Tick. And he discussed that conflict and PTS are as old as time itself. But it's just that in our modern world, the way in which we treat and heal from the impact of war has changed from generation to generation. Ultimately, war changes

everybody. Like we've seen what's happening in Europe, the same thing. What we've also seen is that art helps people communicate experiences across cultural barriers.

So my first encounter with the healing power of art came after I wrote an article in the college newspaper about survivor's guilt. And after that, it was a poem in a college journal about a moral injury. And from there I took some time away from writing and started doing a lot of photography, and I was shooting all of these first-person images. And, eventually, my MA professor said that I should submit them. So I emailed a moderator for Douglas Harding's philosophical website.

Over that decade, I had amassed this huge photographic essay that was shared with the Headless Way in the UK and France. And when I took time to look back on it, it had more to do with the war than I thought. Through all of these photos, I was explaining my feelings about fear of roadside bombs or decapitation. My view from the neck down, or that headless experience, and it was helping me conceptualize this idea, this response of fight or flight, and how I wanted to move into, you know, more peaceful ideas.

So I went back to writing in 2010 and I focused completely on military journals. My work was in the Veterans Writing Project. Fred Foote and Jerri Bell helped me get some stuff published. And then in some other military journals we well. The themes in these military communities appeared in my writing.

So I wrote something called Sandpiper Man and it was published in O-Dark-30, and it was about separation from my spouse and worries over being a widow. I wrote Belly Jazz, and that's about fertility challenges that we were experiencing. I made Hold the Guac, and that's a film poem about burn pits. And it was shown at the Army in the Arts Fringe Festival. I wrote Two are Fallen; it's a poem published by Oxford Brookes which discusses commemorating all those that we lost in conflict. I made Nema, which is a film poem, and that was about miscarriages. Agents of War was published by Berfrois Magazine and it discusses poor health conditions, sleep loss, migraines, mental health, all of those kinds of things. A Love Letter to Me was published in Ice Floe Press, and that's about suicidal ideation. A Lifetime of War was a multimedia piece, and it was most recently included in Pentract, The Book, and it focuses on the obstacles facing all of our military families.

So that was from 2010 to 2019, and then, you know, we hit our pandemic in 2020. And so my storytelling and the archetypes kind of changed a little bit, and I started thinking more about visual poetry from what I had learned at a workshop at Oxford Brookes. So I was making things called -- what I call ash poems and film shorts. And then sound poetry, podcasts, and open mics like we're doing today - the podcast. Playwriting experiences and experiments, contests, and competitions.

I became a finalist in the National 9/11 poetry competition with Challenge America. And nowadays, since the pandemic is kind of winding down, I've noticed that my art is changing again. So it's turning more towards contemporary themes – absurdism and Dadaism and surrealism and avant-garde. Those other types of themes that aren't necessarily about the military whatsoever, but there's always that thread.

I have a debut from Paper View Books, and it's featured – it has a lot to do with those other elements. So the photography comes in, the ash poetry comes in, and all of that's in the Paper View book that I'm in. And then I've been doing a lot more with art exhibitions in museums and galleries with the V.A. Vet Center and with a nonprofit called Uniting Us; it's founded by AnnMarie Halterman.

So all of this -- what this tells me, over this amount of time, and what I'd like everybody to know, is if you create it there will be an audience for the art. Even if that audience is just you, you're the most important person.

>> So how do you think art can be used to promote equity?

>> Art is the great equalizer. We have witnessed time and again the way that artists take down establishments and systems that just aren't fair. Artists -- you associate them with all the different groups in the world. So, the elite will talk to artists, blue-collar workers will talk to artists, downtrodden will talk to artists.

There are plenty of examples from my own art that discuss these themes of equity and promoting equity. So I write a lot about women warrior themes and historical themes dealing with women and female veterans. I talk about the health problems associated with burn pits. Behavioral health stigmas, LGBTQ stories, and the Me Too movement of sexual harassment, sexual assault, and military sexual trauma. I've talked a lot about, and so have a lot of my friends who also make a lot of art.

So before I ever even published anything, I had to write those words down, though. And that's a process where you're going through shock and grief. And then you have to decide whether or not to even let those stories out into the world. It requires, like, some soul searching and sometimes different triggers will trigger different emotions and that'll bring out art.

Now, the pandemic is definitely going to bring some creative energy, whether you want it to or not, because we're all experiencing this big social trauma. So I was able to create a lot of art during the pandemic. And that doesn't necessarily mean that everybody was able to, but I do know a lot of artists that were fueled or repelled by that event. So the difference is that if you aren't comfortable or ready to heal through therapy, art is a healthy way to process trauma.

So I've published art on controversial topics that were more accepted by civilian communities than they were by military writing communities. And, to me, this boils down to the pace or acceptance of equality for women in the armed services.

Art creates this conversation which bridges the civilian and military divide. It helps us to talk about struggles. Here I am as a military spouse, we've relocated CONUS and OCONUS nearly 10 times in our years of marriage. And this means I was educated online. I worked as a docent or a volunteer, an assistant, unpaid, low wage, whatever you want to call it. I've been underemployed and denied employment. I've attended job interviews, both civilian and GS, and I've had the interviewers illegally respond to things like we know your spouse is in the military and you'll be leaving soon. It just isn't physically responsible for us to train an employee who will leave the company in a couple of years.

I didn't fight the systems in a traditional sense, but I did get to work making art to address a lot of frustrations. I, like I said, got on podcasts, and I made these different things and I attended round tables and conventions. And then I got to work working on a website so that I could put my name on a business card and say this is what I'm creating. Even though I'm moving all these times, I can still say I'm creating something and I still have that feeling of accomplishment. And I was seeing these dominant military themes in the art, as we talked about earlier.

So, in this way, I believe storytelling my experiences helped people understand a bit of what our service members and our families go through, and that helps with equity.

>> Your words are really inspiring. And if somebody is listening and they are inspired to begin creating their own work, what are some of the things that they could do to get started?

>> I'd say find your group. A lot of people like to say find your tribe, but it's just finding people that you're comfortable around. If you like art, you should consider art veterans groups like those that are sponsored by the V.A. or the Vet centers. Uniting Us, Challenge America, The National Veterans Art Museum.

But if you're more, like, a prose or a memoir writer, there's some other submission places that you can submit to. I know a person, Kelly Kennedy, she's the editor for The War Horse. There's a group called The Line, Wrath-Bearing Tree, Veterans Writing Workshop, Warrior Writers, Veterans Writing Project. I've talked a little bit earlier about Oxford Brookes Poetry Center.

There are all these groups that can help spark creativity. But if you don't like art, you can still be inspired other ways that actually will help you with your art in the long run, if you decide to go that route. Hiking groups, or equestrian groups, comedy, or musical groups. There's a place for you. You're welcome in lots of communities and can bring art into those places, or you can make art at home.

There aren't any rules that say you even have to share anything; you can make art and then keep the art for yourself. But if you branch out, there are some things that I would definitely suggest as an artist. The first would be look for the independent publishers; they're called indie presses. These are small publications that you can submit to through a thing called Submittable. Or you can do a search on Twitter or Instagram or Tumblr where there are many presses that have these things called submission calls.

If you use social media, which all of us do now, you can follow editors and publications that you like. And each will have guidelines. You just submit by providing exactly what's requested through those guidelines. So you're going to have a cover letter and it should be concise. In the heading you'd put your POC contact details, the publications details, and you should address it to the editor of the publication. And you should say in your heading, or whatever, here are my pieces for consideration in your publication. Sincerely, and your name. And you should think about when you hit that submit your job isn't done because you should never badmouth an editor or a publication.

If your work is ever rejected -- and it will be, my work has been rejected more than it's been accepted. You just have to be magnanimous. I heard that advice given by one of the editors, his name is James Knight from Steel Incisors Press, and I thought it was great. It's true, rejections are just part of the process, and you will have those rejections. But it's all about the fit. It's not about you personally, it's just about the fit of your piece. So I would say get to know the journals that interest you so that you can see what sort of style the editor is looking for to print. It might take a long process of trial and error, but eventually, you'll get published if that's your goal. Be patient and just ask for help. Know that this process is all helping you. It just is because art is really therapeutic.

And you can even follow me, Maggs Vibo, on Twitter, or you can follow different types of mentors, people who inspire you that are smart on these topics, that are smart in the writing communities. Look for the smart people. Watch what they're doing. People post lots of tips. And nothing says that you have

to publish, but if you do, you can always use a pseudonym if that's what you'd rather do. There isn't any one way to be an artist, but the first step is just to recognize that you already have a story to tell. You don't go through the military without having a story. You can tell it if you want to. And I, personally, as an artist, encourage you to do that wholeheartedly because it has helped me in so many ways. Thank you.

>> Oh, my gosh. Thank you, Maggs. Thank you so much for the time and for sharing your story and for all of the advice you've shared with the audience. For everyone who joined us, I want to thank you all for listening. And I hope that you'll join us on another episode.

Take care.