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Art After the Military (ArtAm)

Introduction

Arts engagement has healing power; the cathartic process of creating art can be therapeutic for the art maker, without verbal or medical analysis. Art making and the therapeutic nature of the process of creating provides the creator a visual voice to express nonverbal feelings, traumas, and fears after traumatic and negative experiences.

Recent wars have produced a veteran population in the U.S. of nearly 22,000,000 individuals (Americans for the Arts, 2013). Veterans returning from military experiences who are suffering from trauma at times experience *alexithymia*¹ and are unable to verbally² express themselves as they silently battle personal demons. Trauma can affect humans psychosocially and psychologically, causing a disruption to daily life, resulting in but not limited to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), anxiety disorders, and depression (National Center for PTSD, n.d). Stigmas associated with veterans seeking medical help or therapy for any ailment runs contrary to their military training for strength, honor, and bravery while serving, this contradiction may keep veterans from seeking the help that they need for issues related to PTSD and anxiety disorders (Americans for the Arts, 2013; Appleton, 2001; Collie, Backos, Malchiodi, and Spiegel, 2006; Wiseman, 2015). Expressive art making has historically been an outlet for veterans (D'Amico, 1945, NVAM, 2015; Michel, 2004), most notably through the National Veterans Art Museum (NVAM),³ and could be used to facilitate nonverbal means of expression,

¹ Alexithymia is a psychiatric term used to describe the inability to express feelings or emotions verbally (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/medical>).

² Trauma is a nonverbal problem (Talwar, 2007) and is stored in nonverbal areas of the brain.

³ NVAM houses one of the largest collections (2,500 pieces) of veteran artwork in the United States (B. Foster, personal communication, July 13, 2016).

trauma processing, and communication by veterans (Gantt and Tinnin, 2009; Hass-Cohen, Findlay, Carr, and Vanderlan, 2014; Nanda, Barbato, Hathorn, and Watkins, 2010). PTSD is triggered by a terrifying event or multiple events over time, witnessed directly or indirectly with varying results in and symptoms. Reactions to trauma and devastation can be immediate or delayed and range in severity, behaviors, and responses for both adults and children (<http://www.nimh.nih.gov>). PTSD is a mental health condition that can include negative symptoms such as such as flashbacks of traumatic events, avoidance and dissociative reactions, hyper-vigilance, altercation and arousal reactivity, nightmares, severe anxiety, mood changes, and uncontrollable and intrusive thoughts about the events (E. Smith, personal communication, September 24, 2015). With some of the symptoms being so severe veterans are sometimes crippled mentally although their physical bodies have survived military experiences unscathed.

During trauma a primal fight-or-flight response kicks into gear, the memories of the trauma get miss-wired and can possibly keep the victim in a constant state of emergency reaction. (Johnson, 2015). Untangling the miss-wired trauma memories by creating a trauma narrative is considered standard in the treatment of PTSD throughout therapy methods and endorsed by the US department of Veterans Affairs (www.ptsd.va.gov). Art expression stimulates narrative. Accessing non-verbal experiences of traumatic events through artmaking and creating visual imagery, can create a trauma narrative allowing processing of speechless trauma, increasing sensory awareness, and emotion regulation (Talwar, 2007). Studies in art therapy used to treat PTSD have proven beneficial because of the difficulty of expressing traumatic memories verbally. PTSD treatment with art therapy is most beneficial because of the exposure to difficult traumatic content in conjunction with the pleasurable distraction of art making (Collie, Backos, Malchiodi, and Spiegel, 2006). The effectiveness of art therapy in the

reduction of trauma symptoms through the creative process of artistic self-expression is evident by increased resolution of problems and conflicts, increase self-esteem and self-awareness, behavior management, reduced stress, and the development of interpersonal and communication skills (Americans for the Arts, 2013).

Studies in neuroscience have discovered that art making is a whole brain activity not just a right brain activity. Research with children indicates drawing while talking about a traumatic event can stimulate two-to-three times more narrative than talking alone. Art expression is a form of re-exposure to sensory memories and for some this allows for meaning making (Malchiodi, 2011).

I propose a program, entitled Art After Military (ArtAm), to address the void in traditional treatments for trauma and anxiety disorders through nonverbal creative outlet of art making for military veterans. ArtAm will utilize the vehicle of art making to allow for a pleasurable escape from intrusive thoughts during the process of art making and allow a space for expression of experiences in an effort to facilitate veterans' communication, creation of a trauma narrative and healing. ArtAm's mission is to provide veterans with the materials and a safe space to create a visual voice through art, potentially facilitating conversations about veteran's experiences after traumatic events in an attempt to place fragmented traumatic memories properly within a historical timeline and promote healing.

Program Description

Through a recent case study of a community-based art education (CBAE) military veteran outreach program entitled Creative Journey, I have made contacts with my local Veterans Affairs Medical Center from which many participants of the outreach attend. Through the Creative Journey's model I will borrow the ideas of both facilitators and funding for ArtAm.

Facilitators of ArtAm will primarily local volunteering teaching artists utilized to teach specialized techniques or materials as well as myself. One of the artist volunteers of Creative Journey, who is also a Vietnam veteran commented to me recently that his work with the veterans was so rewarding that if he could volunteer one time per week⁴ instead of two times per⁵ month, he would be glad to do so.

Location

I propose that in Columbia, SC specifically, the Wm. Jennings Bryan (WJB) Dorn Veterans Affairs Medical Center (VAMC) utilize one of its large class/activity⁶ rooms for art making sessions. Use of an existing state or federally funded facility would be ideal for this program reducing costs.

Through my research at Creative Journey I learned from Doctor of Psychiatry Karley Warren that veterans tend to congregate at WJB Dorn VAMC (personal communication, July 10, 2016). During an informal observation at Creative Journey veteran Terry Ball⁷ expressed that if there were only two people attending Creative Journey he wouldn't attend. Ball feels more comfortable in social settings if more people are around attending "in case something happens" and told me that his wife worked nearby at the hospital and having her close by made him feel more comfortable about coming to Creative Journey (T. Ball, personal communication, July 10, 2016). He went on to explain that if Creative Journey was at someone's house he wouldn't attend; he likes the fact that it is housed in a city funded facility but he also wishes that medical

⁴ Creative Journey meets once a month for two hours at the Art Center a local CBAE site.

⁵ Another portion of Creative Journey goes one time per month to Fort Jackson, a local Army installation, to work with children with disabilities of active duty military parents. The portion of Creative Journey working with children with disabilities was not included in this case study.

⁶ I am aware of a large classroom at the WJB Dorn VAMC that is utilized by Occupational Therapist Debbie Harding every Friday of the week for small arts projects with veterans.

⁷ Pseudonym has been used to protect veteran anonymity and confidentiality.

staff were onsite.⁸ Ball told me he previously had severe panic attacks that he hid from his wife for two years. Ball's reluctance to attend the veteran outreach if it had low participation and desire for medical staff to be present is associated with his anxiety around panic attacks. This desire to be with other veteran and around medical staff is the basis for my rationale to conduct this outreach at WJB Dorn VAMC.

Wiseman (2015) found that many of the opportunities associated with art therapy that were offered to veterans through NVAM were poorly attended. This is thought to be because of the stigma associated with any form of therapy by veterans and society as a whole. Instead NVAM staff found that the positively titled Creative Communities program, led by veterans, and open to veterans and the community, had greater attendance. NVAM staff's finding, on therapeutic connotations of a program title, influenced the title ArtAm. The title was chosen for this program proposal because it's not associated with art therapy and has a positive association in the term Am suggestion a reclaiming of and ultimate recovery of self that can seem lost in the negative symptoms of PTSD, anxiety disorders, and depression.

Times that ArtAm sessions can be scheduled at WJB Dorn VAMC would be determined by site's current availability of classroom space. In the event that WJB Dorn VAMC is unable to provide space in their current building the Columbia Museum of Art or other local CBAE's will be sought for location needs.

Curricula

Taking direction from the success of Creative Journey art making will for the most part be defined by what veterans want to create with the majority of materials serving drawing and

⁸ Hall's preference of medical staff is related to his panic attacks and symptoms associated, having medical staff present would make him more comfortable in case he needed specialized medical attention.

painting purposes. Although no specific curricula is defined at this time the program may evolve to educate veterans through short modeling or workshops on techniques and media to better serve expressive needs. Educating veterans on expressive mark making as well as elements and principals of design could also be beneficial to their expressive needs while art making. Possible reflections of famous artists work may take place to educate veterans on visual thinking strategies and composition.

Credentials

Research of NVAM, case studies, articles, and seminars have allowed a greater understanding of how artistic opportunities and art making can be therapeutic to those suffering from loss, trauma, and PTSD. I have a personal connection to this research after finding art making to be cathartic and therapeutic for myself after suffering a traumatic event at a young age. Through studying the inception and operation of Creative Journey outreach program, participant stories that support the beneficial therapeutic possibilities of art making were communicated to me⁹.

Borrowing from Creative Journey's beginnings I propose to reach out to local art and trauma therapists for input on how to interact with veterans experiencing negative psychosocial and psychological issues. Art or trauma therapists can also instruct facilitators and volunteers on what imagery to look for, how to speak with veterans when bleak imagery appears, and how to incorporate positive imagery to aid in feelings of comfort, safety, and optimism. Possible partnerships with the Americans for the Arts and American Art Therapy Association could also be forged, borrowing their expertise on the benefits of arts in the military and facilitation of a

⁹ These stories can be found in my case study *Art After the Military: A Case Study of a Community Based Art Education Outreach for Veterans* (www.artsuz.com).

trauma narrative to inform the ArtAm program (Americans for the Arts, 2013; <http://arttherapy.org>). Partnerships with volunteer artist teachers and artist veterans from the Creative Journey program could lend their artistic skills to ArtAm and employ their previous knowledge in working with veterans and sufferers of trauma and PTSD.

Supplies and Funding

The Art Center's outreach Creative Journey currently provides art materials funded by donations alone. Creative Journey receives an average of \$12,000 a year in donations to support the programmatic need for materials (B. Oliver, personal communication, September, 19, 2015). Modeling after this outreach program's success, of twice per month voluntary participation, I propose a \$50,000 budget for supplies and materials alone. This would allow for \$1,000 a week for supplies and allow more than twice-a-week participation. Another \$50,000 could be utilized to support salary and benefits for a program director and any teaching artist's or workshops that may be developed. Supplies and materials purchased in addition to donations and painting and drawing materials would include sketchbooks and media for veterans to draw and journal with when they are not able to attend ArtAm sessions.

Initially, and to get this program started quickly, donations could be collected through a GoFundMe (www.gofundme.com) campaign advertised on social media, through local news organizations, newspapers, and public service announcements on local radio stations. Attempts to gain donations on a national level could be attempted through press releases to national news organizations also. Through ArtAm I propose that art supplies be collected through a community supply drive as well as reaching out to art supply manufacturers, corporate art supply chains,

volunteer artist and art instructors. Blue Star ¹⁰Mothers of South Carolina may also be interested in supporting art supply drives or donations for materials for the ArtAm program.

Funding needed to make ArtAm a reality would provide art supplies and materials as well as salary for a program director and any consultation fees for art therapists or trauma specialists should any initially be utilized. A contract would need to be created, should art or trauma therapists, and educators be employed to ensure accurate and negotiated compensation considering the funds available.

The first attempt to gain funding through grants would be via an Arts Education Projects (AEP) grant through the local SC Arts Commission. Unfortunately this grant would not be beneficial until the award date of July 1 of any year (<http://www.southcarolinaarts.com/>).

At a national level, a grant could be sought through Community Initiative Foundation, partnering with the American Art Therapy Association in the same fashion that a previous grant aided child survivors of Katrina (Dewan, 2007). Through this partnership art therapists from across the country could travel to SC and support ArtAm in promoting positive interactions with artists, volunteers, and Veterans. An Art Works grant from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) is another possible funding source. The NEA offers grants to those seeking to bring art education to communities that reach all demographics, cognitive, and physical abilities (<https://www.arts.gov>). Pending the success of the program, partnerships with American Art Therapy Association, NEA, and Community Initiative Foundation, could facilitate ArtAm as a model for a national scale to address veterans with psychosocial and psychological issues

¹⁰ Blue Star Mothers of South Carolina support Creative Journey with donations, supplies, and volunteers. Blue Star Mothers are women who have children or grandchildren serving in the military, guard, or reserves, or children who are veterans. Blue Star Mother's support one another, their children, and veterans (www.bluestarmothers.org).

benefiting and healing from creative art making process throughout the country. This arts related veteran outreach program is proposed in hopes that other outpatient centers, museums, and community-based art education centers across the country replicate similar programs to share the intrinsically cathartic process of art making with our country's growing veteran population.

Exhibitions of artworks created by veterans could help the community learn about the healing quality of arts engagement and possibly take place at the local Columbia Museum of Art or Universities. This sharing of veteran artwork could hopefully engage other communities to create similar arts related veteran outreach programs.

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