

Songwriting camp helps vets deal with tragedies of war, transition to civilian life

By Colleen O'Connor *The Denver Post* *The Denver Post*
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U.S. Army combat engineer John Wall was deployed twice to Iraq and once to Afghanistan and survived several IED blasts but was hit by an "explosively formed projectile," which caused severe pain and the loss of feeling in his legs.

The blast happened in Baghdad, at a place that veterans call Predator Road. Last summer, at the first Songwriting Camp for Veterans, Wall teamed with eight other vets to turn their shared war experiences into songs.

"It was very healing for everyone who participated," Wall said. "One guy said it was a revival of the soul."

"No one was musically inclined. It wasn't like we showed up with our guitars. We learned we have something else to give and that we can do so much more than we thought."

The second Songwriting Camp for Veterans, held at the Garden of the Gods Club in Colorado Springs, runs through today.

"These guys don't hold back," said Darden Smith, the Austin, Texas-based musician who crafted the retreats based on his "Be An Artist" workshops, which coax creativity from everyone from schoolkids to corporate workers.

"Once you establish trust, they talk about things that will curl your hair," Smith said. "They have seen the best and worst of human existence, and we as civilians have a lot to learn from them."

The music camp is a new program from LifeQuest Transitions, a Colorado Springs nonprofit that helps wounded veterans transition from the military to civilian life. Founder CW Conner came up with the idea of the camp after a presentation to the Colorado Springs Executives Association, he said, attended by about a dozen business leaders.

"I asked how many of their companies had HR (human resources) solutions for post-traumatic stress syndrome or for traumatic brain injury. Zero," he said. "We're in the mecca of a military town, and we've not thought about what to put together for military vets whom we've asked to be at war for 10 years."

He saw an urgent need for a "campaign of awareness" that would connect average citizens to the stories of these veterans and what they've experienced.

"But how would we get people to listen to us?" he said. "After 10 years, people are tired of the wars. They're running in the other direction."

He figured that music — the universal language — might work. So he contacted Smith, who had written the popular song "Angel Flight" with Radney Foster, about the Angel Flight missions that flew home the bodies of soldiers killed in overseas combat.

"There is a huge divide in our culture between civilian and military," Smith said. "I wanted to help in some little way to be a bridge and use songs as a structure for this bridge."

The songs are poignant tales of the difficulties, uncertainties and victories of military life. Lyrics are the vets' own words, pulled out in interviews and conversations with the musicians.

It could happen at a random moment during breakfast with a musician, or even at the final dinner, as happened last year with Wall.

Wall and his Army buddy had been sitting with Denver-born musician Jay Clementi, who had attended the University of Northern Colorado on a football scholarship. Clementi talked about pumping himself up before the games and asked whether the vets had done the same with their missions.

"We listened to music and cranked up the tunes on our iPods," Wall said.

Clementi then asked what particular missions came to mind.

"Every time we went out on Predator Road, you had to get your game face on," Wall said. "It was the deadliest 6 miles in Baghdad."

The road where Wall was hit was a gantlet of EFPs and improvised explosive devices.

The next morning, he and other vets who had known Predator Road decided to capture their feelings about it in a song.

"It was a bad road, but we didn't want to write a sad song," Wall said. "We wanted something to pump you up, something more fast-paced."

The result is a driving anthem of grit and courage, heading down a road of "blown-up cars and blown-up buildings" that offers just "two ways out, and one way's dead."

Songs written during the last camp were performed at the Faces of Freedom concert Sept. 11 at the World Arena in Colorado Springs and are available for purchase on iTunes. Songs from this past weekend's camp are to be included in a full album, with money from sales to benefit the veterans and help fund the LifeQuest programs.

"When you get the opportunity to share your soul with these artists, you form a bond," Wall said. "It doesn't end with music camp. We call; we e-mail back and forth."

For Smith, working with the vets "is one of the most amazing creative experiences I've ever been involved in."

"I feel like I have a connection with these guys. If I ever (need anything), these are the first guys I'm calling," he said. "These are the kind of guys who back you up."

Colleen O'Connor: 303-954-1083 or coconnor@denverpost.com