

As a soldier, she endured multiple sexual assaults. A Nashville songwriter helped her process the trauma.

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Army veteran Sandi Primous spills out the pain of multiple sexual assaults in a song she created through Songwriting With: Soldiers — and the song soon will have a national TV audience.

"I don't wanna live like this

I just wanna have somebody

Who adores me

Is that too much to ask

I don't wanna live with all this fear

Always looking over my shoulder

All this time on my hands

Now that my kids are older"

—**"You Can't Break Me Down,"** Sandi Primous and Georgia Middleman

Sandi Primous said her trauma began shortly after she joined the Army in 1984 when she was 17.

She started dating a 24-year-old soldier who, within two months, became verbally and sexually abusive. He eventually was court martialed on drug charges with no mention of abuse, Primous said. Her unit commander said abuse was omitted from the court martial so the unit wouldn't look bad, she said.

Like many Army combat veterans, Primous battled post traumatic stress during and after her 20 years of service. Primous, though, said her PTSD came from multiple episodes of sexual abuse — military sexual trauma (MST) from men in her ranks.

Often dismissed or ignored when she reported the abuse to her superiors, Primous said she turned to therapy — even becoming a licensed therapist herself — to try to get relief.



Military veteran Sandi Primous, right, writing a song with Nashville songwriter Georgia Middleman in 2015 at a retreat pairing soldiers with songwriters. (Photo: Matt Lankes)

It wasn't until she found a program that paired songwriters with traumatized soldiers a few years back that Primous, 52, found freedom from depression and suicidal thoughts.

Through the program, called [SongwritingWith: Soldiers](#), Primous was paired with well-known Nashville songwriter Georgia Middleman. Primous said she felt relief as soon as Middleman sang the song the two wrote together in 2015 called "You Can't Break Me Down."

"I felt empowered. I felt relieved. Accomplished. Invigorated," Primous said.

"God, that felt good. You know? I wasn't invisible any longer."

"I started crying because she was so ecstatic," the songwriter said. "Her story was being witnessed."



Songwriter Georgia Middleman at her home in Nashville on July 25. (Photo: Andrew Nelles / The Tennessean)

Messed up from the jump

"I wanna say that I'm fine

Though I'm not right now

I wanna say I'll get through this

Though I really don't know how

But I'm a strong, strong woman

And I know I'm gonna be alright

You know why?

I'm Sandi with an I"

Primous' first abuser in the military called her for 10 years after his court martial, saying she had ruined his career and that he would find her and kill her, Primous said.

"That really messed me up from the jump," she said.

About three years later, Primous said, she was sexually assaulted by a man she was assigned to share a tent with. She said her platoon sergeant told her he didn't believe her and that "all women are timid and shouldn't be in the military anyway."

After that, while deployed in Kosovo, Primous said a friend who was a Bible study partner sexually assaulted her.

"I was so disheartened by it," she said. "I didn't say anything because I was married, he was married, I outranked him."

Other incidents followed until she left the service in 2004, she said.

"The biggest struggle has been trying to believe it's not my fault," she said. "What do I do that makes men or women think that it's OK?"

Primous became a counselor to help other military members deal with trauma. She sought treatment for herself, but that proved ineffective for her, in part because she was afraid of running into her patients while she was doing her own work.

"I was crying for help and no one saw me. Georgia saw me."

Army veteran Sandi Primous, on working with Georgia Middleman for SongwritingWith: Soldiers

While counseling others, Primous heard about SongwritingWith: Soldiers and became intrigued, though she wasn't sure why.

"I have no rhythm, can't sing, can't dance, can't hold a note in a bucket," she said, laughing.

But Primous was in a lot of pain, and she was open to try anything.

The few times Primous shared with friends or relatives she was hurting, they blew it off.

"When I got really down and feeling suicidal, they'd say, 'Come on, brush it off! You're OK!' Nobody could believe me. I was so tired of being the one who had to help everybody," she said.

"I was crying for help and no one saw me. Georgia saw me."

'Now I know it's not my fault'

"I wanna tell that MST (military sexual trauma)

Just try to get in my space

And I'll slam the door of my past

Right in your face

'Cause the good news is

You can't break me down this time

You know why?

I'm Sandi with an I

Sandi with an I

Improving

Independent

Inspiring

Sandi with an I"

Middleman, the Nashville songwriter who has written hits for Keith Urban and Kenny Chesney, was paired with Primous at a 2015 songwriting retreat.

The songwriter came into her first retreat with soldiers excited and afraid.

"I thought I had no right to be there because I have no military background," Middleman said. "And I want to honor what they do, but I don't speak that language so I was scared."

She and Primous, though, connected quickly.

"Georgia was so amazing," the veteran said.

"When Georgia heard my story, she was in tears. It was like our souls were connected," she said. "She felt me and she saw me. I wasn't invisible to her."



"After their song has been written, they bounce into a room like a rock has been lifted off the soldier," said songwriter Georgia Middleman of working on the SongwritingWith: Soldiers program. (Photo: Andrew Nelles / The Tennessean)

Middleman said she was blown away by Primous' story.

"She was very quiet in the beginning, and then she completely opened up. And it was very brave."

When the two finished writing the song and Middleman sang it, she saw Primous' body lighten.

After writing more than 20 songs with soldiers, Middleman said she now sees that often.

"After their song has been written, they bounce into a room like a rock has been lifted off the soldier," Middleman said.

Since that writing session, Primous has become a volunteer for fellow soldiers, veterans and others, and she's very active with SongwritingWith: Soldiers.

"I used to be afraid and embarrassed with stigma around mental health problems and sexual trauma. Now I know it's not my fault anymore," Primous said.

"I don't mind talking about it. There's so many other people who want to talk about it. And I don't want them to be afraid or feel small anymore. Because I used to feel really really small."

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