

Bullets & Band-aids

by Marilyn Thomas

A Picture Is Worth a Thousand Wars

Since its commencement in 2012, *Bullets & Band-aids* has sponsored four living art traveling tours throughout the Southeast, with the most recent one having been launched in February of 2023.

This non-profit art anthology harnesses, showcases, and promotes the healing power of creative expression with its unique brand of art therapy. Service persons choose to tell their own “veteran-centric” story or be paired with volunteering citizens skilled in writing and creating artwork.

Once the narrative is documented, either directly or by a volunteer writer, an artist is then commissioned to convey that experience by producing a customized artistic composition.

Locally, “Volume 4” of *Bullets & Band-aids* is on display at the Columbia Museum of Art located at 1515 Main Street and will be available for public viewing until September 7, 2023.

Robert LeHeup, the founder of *Bullets and Band-aids*, is a graduate of the University of South Carolina and a former Marine. He was stationed in Afghanistan where he received notable commendations for acts of bravery during combat. After retiring as a sergeant, Mr. LeHeup began working with artists in different forms of mixed media and raised funding for charities through these projects. Before establishing *Bullets & Band-aids* he volunteered as a creative writing teacher to underprivileged children and incarcerated persons throughout North and South Carolina.

The artwork displayed within the exhibit was created in South Carolina as well as in the neighboring states of North Carolina and Georgia, but the opportunity to contribute is not exclusive to locals or only American citizens. “Out of our 115 participants,” says Founder LeHeup, “we have 9 people involved from outside the United States, including Afghanistan, Russia, and Ukraine.” The entries within the project are as diverse and eclectic as the stories depicted and utilize artistic media such as “sculptures to mosaics to watercolors, acrylics, and a broad swath of mixed media, including one that is blacklight activated,” says Mr. LeHeup. “We have storyforms from expressionist poetry to prose, one-act plays to culinary recipes, each with their own voice-overs,” he adds. The individual displays are made audible for viewers through posted QR codes. “This year we cover stories including humor, nuclear warfare, sex-



ual assault, racial disparities, psychedelics, military spouses, ALS [Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis], burn pits, and many more,” says Mr. LeHeup.

“Everyone imagines they know what to expect, but what we do has literally never been done before,” Mr. LeHeup explains. “If you come to one of our exhibits, and it is what you expect it to be, then we haven’t done our job.” Described as “art therapy



reimagined,” he continues, “Every person that involves themselves with Bullets & Band-aids, be that a participant or an attendee, feels the effects of what we do.”

Providing a platform for veterans to “speak their Truth” is not the only expectation of the exhibit. “We can guarantee that Truth is heard,” asserts Mr. LeHeup. “Through the immersive experience we provide, where people can listen to the written story while looking at the artwork that is entirely based on their own humanity, along with the physical print of the book encompassing the show, they are able to share their stories with friends, family, and their community as a whole. This dialogue addresses not just the immediate issues they face, but the underlying ones that,

once addressed, can stem the plague of isolation, domestic violence, substance abuse, depression, and suicidal ideation our veterans are so steeped in.”

Furthermore, the involvement and experiences of civilian writers and artists are also multifaceted and profound. “Our writer and artist participants are intentionally placed outside of their comfort zones, including presupposed boundaries of demographic,” explains Mr. LeHeup. “As a creative, this forced pushing of boundaries enhances their perspectives and allows them the opportunity to not simply explore themselves, but their place in the world. Add to that the conversations they can start with veterans in the future and the healing is literally unquantifiable. Because



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this is a massively collaborative exhibit made of people from across demographics where no single person could do it themselves, the end result is a mutual gratitude shared across the entirety of the program. That alone is a monumental step toward the healing process on a massive scale.”

Lexington resident Bobbie Dameron, a songwriter and former military spouse, is one of the artists featured in the exhibit. Her contribution is a song entitled “Whatever Happened.” One of the main themes of the piece is the grief that her daughter, Carlie, has experienced because of the untimely death of her 36-year-old father, Anthony “Tony” Wade Thornton, who succumbed to brain cancer in 2015. Mr. Thornton was a machinist mate first class in the United States Navy, and while touring in Iraq, he was exposed to burn pits. According to the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs’ website, “In Iraq, Afghanistan, and other areas of the Southwest Asia theater of military operations, open-air combustion of trash and other waste in burn pits was a common practice.” This division of the government also acknowledges that exposure to the “airborne hazards” of the burn pits could result in serious health issues. Within their inventory of “presumptive conditions” (i.e., to “presume” that “specific disabilities diagnosed in certain veterans were caused by their military service”), brain cancer is listed.

“My youngest daughter, Carlie, was 11 when her dad passed away from the brain cancer he got from the burn pits in Iraq,” says Ms. Dameron. “The song [about this issue] came to me in my sleep. In my thoughts, the day I wrote the song, I was in despair saying to myself, ‘What happened to her?’ meaning this bright-eyed child who saw nothing but good in almost everything her whole life. This song hit me because it’s the burn pits and cancer that hit her along with losing her dad, and I realized the magnitude of all the families across the nation.”

“My song is the first song ever included in the exhibit,” Ms. Dameron adds. While emceeding at a fundraising event for Bullets & Band-aids in 2022, she performed the piece. “I did this to show the crowd a live version of what taking a veteran’s story and creating art would feel like in the moment. Mr. LeHeup decided to include my song in the Volume 4 tour that’s happening now in several cities in the Southeast.” For the Bullets & Band-aids’ exhibit, a recent rendition of the song was recorded by Jazlee Fenn, a



trained singer who performed in Carnegie Hall and Ms. Dameron’s oldest daughter. Additionally, a painting entitled “Where There’s Smoke There’s Fire” was created by Vanessa Grebe with oil and mixed media on canvas to represent this difficult experience. “I did not see the art piece that was created until the opening night in Savannah, Georgia,” Ms. Dameron remarks. “I stood there and cried.”

“Bullets & Band-aids is more than an art exhibit,” she concludes. “I believe it’s healing. The reach of this mission cannot be measured—it’s a flowing ocean of reach we are yet to fully understand. I’m grateful to be a part of it all and hope my song helps veterans who have been exposed seek the help they need to get well.” The nonprofit’s website shares additional detailed information about the project and its participants, sells contributors’ one-of-a-kind artwork as well as branded merchandise, and provides submission guidelines for art, writing, etc., to be considered for future exhibits. You can support this project by simply taking the time to visit the Bullets & Band-aids’ exhibit while it is on display locally. “If you like what we’re doing,” says Mr. LeHeup, “go to the exhibits, let the Columbia Museum of Art know why you’re there, spread the word, and donate!” ■



Scan to listen to Ms. Dameron’s song.

Bullets & Band-aids’ mission is to promote “social cohesion between veterans and civilians. By blurring the line between these participants, we can underscore that we are all in this together, sharing our lives and humanity, regardless of our past experiences.”

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