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Veterans find a stage to help ease their painful memories

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It's like an invisible epidemic. People walk among us, work among us, appear to be moving on with their lives. But inside they're stuck. Inside they're reliving what they saw and heard and did in wartime.

A lot of them may feel it's impossible to get rid of the flashbacks, the nightmares, the intrusive memories.

But this weekend and next a number of local folks who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder because of their memories of war will offer their stories to the public, in a small theater on the campus of Portland State University. They've spent eight months moving those unwanted memories from their nightmares to the theatrical stage. And the process alone has wrought what a few call miracles.

"My memories don't have such an emotional charge," says Eran Deran, who was a medic in Vietnam. "Now they're just memories of things that happened in the past. I can file them away and they don't have such a strong, emotional, anger-filled pull on me like they used to."

The evening is called "Soldier's Heart," and it's a production of a remarkable local nonprofit organization called The Well Arts Institute. The institute helps people and family members trying to cope with illness or trauma by teaching them to create stories about their experiences, which are then shared by actors on stage.

For this project, says Kate Hawkes, the artistic executive director of the institute, "we partnered with the Portland Vet Center and the Veterans Administration. We asked them to recommend a few people."

"I was seeing a counselor at the VA," Eran says, "and he asked if I'd be interested. I said absolutely not. It scared me. I thought it might trigger too many bad memories."

But Eran changed his mind; he'd try anything, he decided, to help ease his post-traumatic stress. In September he and seven other people showed up at the first creative workshop to begin the structured process of putting stories on paper.

Participants included the wife of a Korean War vet, four Vietnam vets, and three young men who'd been involved in the Persian Gulf War.

Kate Hawkes taught people who'd never done much writing "to not worry about editing, punctuation, spelling," Eran says, "just to let it flow." Eran, who'd always found writing "tedious," suddenly found "it became a joy."

It took months for the participants to discover what form their stories would take. "It was a slow process," Eran says. "I had an idea I wanted to tell about the horrors of war and the awful things I saw. But as I wrote, it started going in a different direction, and it was obvious the way it was supposed to go."

"It turned into a journey of self-discovery and of finding myself, finding someone I'd been looking for, for 37 years." Eran learned "I had left something behind in Vietnam, and that was a part of me -- the young, innocent, naive young man who went there not expecting what he found in Vietnam. That part of me never came home, and it needed to be brought home so I could become whole again. And it happened."

When the stories seemed ready, actors were brought in. "Now for the first time they hear other people reading their stories," Kate says. "When you read it yourself, you feel like you have some sense of control. When you give it to someone else to read, it's not just yours anymore. It's both frightening and empowering."

Kate and the actors worked with the participants, dissecting the stories, asking questions about meaning and emotion, finding ways to use lighting and movement onstage to tell the tales.

Eran wasn't the only veteran who began feeling relief during the process. Another writer told Kate, "the more I worked through this, the more I edited it, the less heavy it became, the less it was this horrible thing I was carrying around on my own. It got less horrible, less frightening, less painful. It still can make me cry, but somehow it's not this big heavy secret."

Eran's story, called "Welcome Home, Eran," is performed by local actor Michael Teufel. "The first time I read it I was so incredibly moved I could hardly get the words out," Michael says. "It was deeply affecting, deeply touching. He's a hero."

Michael has seen changes in Eran and the other writers in the last few months. "Nobody wanted to know what went on when they came home" from war, he says. "To not be able to share your experience was crippling. This process is a way of healing that wound."

The writers of "Soldier's Heart" are from different wars, they have different political opinions, they have different nightmares. But they have things in common. They once thought they might be crazy. They once thought they were alone. And they didn't really believe anything could help.

Now they know that every time you tell a story, it loses a little power over you. "By taking my story and literally handing it to actors, I felt like I had handed them a lot of my baggage. It doesn't weigh on me like it did," says Vietnam vet Ted Kiser.

"Soldier's Heart" will be performed this Sunday and Monday and the following Sunday and Monday. For tickets and more information, call 503-459-4500 or go to www.soldiersheart.org.

Margie Boule: 503-221-8450; marboule@aol.com

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