

Voices of Valor helps vets transition through music

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For the NJ Courier News and Home News Tribune/Asbury Park Press

SCOTCH PLAINS — For the 27th time in less than two years, Voices of Valor is about to release a song recording that helped a group of veterans release the emotional wounds of war and other issues related to military service.

The township-based initiative — founded three years ago by the therapeutic Music for All Seasons program and funded largely by Robert Wood Johnson Foundation — will present “Sumac Sky” at Westergard Library in Piscataway on Thursday. A portion of the song’s lyrics are a tribute to a fallen colleague of retired Coast Guard reservist Diane Semmling of Piscataway. See videos about and by Voices of Valor at www.MyCentralJersey.com/video.

When fellow “Coastie” Vinnie Danz perished in a rescue mission during the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, Semmling said she was left with a gaping wound in her psyche. Writing and recording “Sumac Sky” with two fellow veterans from Piscataway has been healing, she said.

“It’s a song about hope,” said Semmling, 60, who penned the tune with Ed Thomas, a 90-year-old World War II veteran of battles in India, China and Burma, and Steve Jakubowycz, a 53-year-old Army vet.

Dubbed The Prevailers, the trio joins three groups from the Lyons Campus of the VA New Jersey Healthcare System in Bernards and Veterans Haven North in Glen Gardener as the program’s most recent local projects.

The cooperative catharsis of the teamwork involved in all Voices of Valor songwriting and recording sessions marks an even greater impact than the creative catharsis, said Laura Blaine, an administrator at Haven North.

“Some people like to do things where they only think of the ‘I’s’ and doing that would sometimes devastate them because they’re not communicating to other people because it’s just ‘me,’ ” Blaine said. “It’s, ‘I only care about myself.’ With that in mind, when you’re able to work with a group, it becomes easier for yourself, because it’s not yourself against the whole world. It’s now within a group that’s helping you to improve yourself to get better.”

Working again

Karen Dillard of Somerset County is an example of Voices of Valor’s transformational impact.

Dillard, an Army sergeant medically discharged with a 1991 injury after eight

years of service, said participating in the Lyons recording of “A Better Place” helped her heal from post-traumatic stress. The encouragement Voices of Valor gave while working on the uplifting track also helped her transition into employment at the hospital where she was once a patient, Dillard said.

“It was very freeing to get to work with other vets,” she said. “Being that I’m a victim of PTSD, it helped me come out of that shell. Before this, I did a lot of isolating, but I got to meet a lot of people who were going through the same thing. It really helped to get a lot of things that were inside, out.

“And it got me working with people again,” Dillard added. “I had not worked in years. It touched me that I could do that through music. People say they see a lot of joy in my face when I’m singing. I got my confidence back.”

Dillard exuded confidence during a recent Voices of Valor performance at the Veterans Day celebration in New Brunswick.

When not performing, she works at the VA hospital in Lyons teaching fellow vets computer and literacy skills. She said she eventually will seek employment outside the hospital.

“They said, ‘You’re like a totally different person than when you came here,’ ” Dillard said.

Writing it down

Most of the veterans groups work with clinical psychologist Ray Hanbury, New Jersey State Clinical Director of the Trauma and Disaster Response Team, and a mental health officer with the National Disaster Medical System in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Hanbury typically is joined by two of the program’s seven music professional facilitators.

They are Miss USO 2001 Jennifer Lampert, sought-after session man/band leader Benny Harrison, author-teacher-vocalist Gwyn English Nielsen of Scotch Plains, local crooner Lou Watson, singer-songwriter-guitarist Pascale Jean-Louis, musician-producer Sky “Disco” Dietrich, and Julio Fernandez, 30-year guitarist for Grammy-nominated jazz act Spyro Gyra. All have been trained by Voices of Valor to deal with veterans and their issues and to work closely with Hanbury, said Brian Dallow, co-founder of Music for All Seasons with his wife, Rena Fruchter.

“I read a lot of psychological studies of how to address issues of trauma,” Dallow said. “One of the things that we discovered was that one of the most effective ways of addressing trauma is to write down your

traumatic experiences. Whether you discuss them with anybody else or not, if

you write them down, it begins to get it out. If you then have the opportunity not only to write it down, but then discuss it with people who understand it and can interact with you, it gives an even greater impact.”

In addition to VA hospitals, Voices of Valor works with veterans at DeVry University in North Brunswick and Montclair State University, whose Active Order group will celebrate the release of “Family” on Dec. 11.

Having had previous experience with the powerful impact of music on veterans, DeVry graduate business professor Michael Faulkner agreed to serve on the Voices of Valor advisory board.

“When I saw an organization that had been successful,” said Faulkner, a former Marine, “and obviously had a very close place in my heart with veterans and the issues that they’re having, I saw an opportunity for me to give back to veterans with a tool that I was familiar with, with music.”

Looking back - and forward

Classical musicians, Fruchter and Dallow founded Music for All Seasons in 1991 to provide performances to nursing homes, hospitals, prisons and other facilities whose populations can’t access live music.

The catalyst for Voices of Valor was a similar program Music for Seasons created 12 years ago to reach deeply traumatized children in shelters for victims of domestic violence, Dallow said.

With the help of his advisory board and major sponsors, he said he hopes to expand Voices of Valor nationwide to other veterans’ hospitals and DeVry campuses. The advisory board also includes retired Major Gen. Maria Falca-Dodson, former commander of the New Jersey Air National Guard, and retired Air Force Major Amy Hutchens, a former judge advocate general, now general counsel and vice president of compliance and ethics at the Watermark risk-management firm in Washington, D.C.

Having refined Music for All Seasons’ program for young victims of domestic abuse, Voices of Valor has inspired a forthcoming effort to work with drug-addicted teenagers, Fruchter said. The new initiative was suggested by a Voices of Valor veteran, she said.

Dillard encouraged all veterans to join Voices of Valor.

At Lyons, they will get to do just that, said Laurie Tomaino, director of recreation therapy for VA New Jersey Healthcare System.

“This is a program that VA New Jersey Healthcare System would like to continue to benefit our nation’s heroes,” Tomaino said.