

TWO RIVER LIFESTYLES

The Power of Music

Program Turns Vets into Musicians, Producers

By Laura D.C. Kolnoski

TINTON FALLS – The sound of music is reverberating through Soldier On's Gordon H. Mansfield Veterans community, where 13 residents recently wrote and recorded an original song, memorializing the feat on CD and video.

The Voices of Valor program, part of the Music for All Seasons organization based in Scotch Plains, seeks to honor veterans through music, easing the transition from military to civilian life, according to co-founder and interim executive director Rena H. Fruchter.

Calling themselves the "Essex Road Ensemble" after the street their residence fronts, the group collaboratively produced "Believe in Love" over nine weeks, recording it at Asbury Park's Lakehouse Studios, facilitated by longtime New Jersey music professionals Benny Harrison and Laura Blaine.

At the launch party, where the group heard the completed tune for the first time, a video was filmed, and each participant received a CD and a challenge coin. The "Believe in Love" video can be viewed on the Voices of Valor Facebook page under the "More" tab.

"We are heartened to see the joy and transformation taking place in the veterans participating in Voices of Valor (and) are happy to provide this opportunity to those who have given so



Residents and staff of the Soldier On veterans' community in Tinton Falls recently celebrated the release of the CD and video of their original song, "Believe in Love."

much of themselves to our country," Fruchter said, adding the program was funded in part by a grant from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts Creative Aging Initiative.

This is the third time Music for All Seasons has brought VOV to Soldier On: twice in Tinton Falls and once at the organization's Pittsfield, Mass., headquarters.

"The program was so successful in New Jersey I wanted to do it in Massachusetts," said Bruce Buckley, Soldier On's chief executive director, who attended some sessions. They came (to Pittsfield) six months ago, and it was equally successful. It captures the veterans' collective experiences as they work together as a team on lyrics and music. We intend to continue the program on a regular basis."

The Massachusetts ensemble subsequently formed a group and received donations of guitars, another aspect Buckley hopes to emulate in Tinton Falls. Assisting, he said, is local Grammy-nominated musician Ron Haney of the Eddie Testa Band, who has played with Southside Johnny Lyon and Gary U.S. Bonds and produced albums for Alicia Keys.

Buckley said Haney is soliciting his musical community for instruments, and efforts are underway to garner publicity.

"Broadcasting what we do captures public attention and support," Buckley said, adding of Soldier On, "It's not the building, it's the community that forms in the building."

Participating veterans frequently ask to repeat the

experience, Fruchter said.

"This is an excellent program I wish my Uncle Manny could have had," said Harrison, who has worked with musicians from Bruce Springsteen to Flavor Flav and currently tours with Tommy James and the Rascals. "He was a career man in the Air Force who had a hard time being a civilian. Creating a song with these vets enabled and inspired them to communicate their feelings with each other and tighten their bonds. Trust and transparency were empowered."

Harrison has led numerous VOV sessions along with Laura Blaine, a musician and lyricist who guided the veterans through crafting the lyrics.

"Music serves as a universal language that can speak to the heart and help



COURTESY SOLDIER ON

At Lakehouse Recording Studios in Asbury Park, veteran Anthony Huntley, left, records an original song written with fellow vets with assistance from professional musician Benny Harrison, right.

individuals process emotions in a powerful way," Blaine said. "Voices of Valor provides this platform... along with fostering empowerment, a safe atmosphere and social connection. It's amazing how this program gives veterans the feeling of accomplishment, joy and pride in what they created."

Each VOV session is assigned a psychology mentor. Andre Ho, a fourth-year medical student at Hackensack Meridian School of Medicine who attended the Essex Road Ensemble sessions, called VOV "incredible" and "a safe, nonjudgmental space."

"In this setting, their song fosters a deep sense of connection with others that may not be otherwise possible," Ho said.

Employing his training at both Jersey Shore University Medical Center and Hackensack University Medical Center, Ho also monitored participants for any signs of distress. The professional musicians involved are also trained to ensure that they deal sensitively with each participant's needs.

The psychology mentor also helps evaluate the

program by administering surveys of the sessions, as well as speaking with each participant to determine the results and benefits of the program. Evaluation is an important element for funders, "who need to know before funding us... that the sessions are having a positive result. It has been our pleasure to work with Soldier On," Fruchter said.

Created in 2011, VOV has facilitated the creation of over 75 songs by veterans under the guidance of professional musicians. Between eight and 14 veterans participate in each nine-week cycle. Five cycles of the program in five different veterans' residential facilities are scheduled in New Jersey during 2025.

No musical background is required. Participation is free of charge through funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, The Blanche & Irving Laurie Foundation, PNC Bank, the Jewish Women's Foundation of New Jersey, and Johnson & Johnson. Music For All Seasons, founded in 1991, is active in New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, California and Massachusetts.

Lincroft Senior Citizens Housing Corporation

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