

The Blog: California Arts Council Advancing California through the Arts and Creativity

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By California Arts Council

Giving back to those who served

California is home to nearly 2 million Veterans – more than any other state – accounting for 8.3% of our nation’s veterans. Our Council prioritizes the needs of veterans, and has seen firsthand how engagement with the arts and creative expression can benefit the quality of life for those who have served our country, and their families.

Soon entering its third year, our **Veterans Initiative in the Arts** grant program is uniquely designed to support nonprofit arts organizations, local arts agencies, and veterans’ assistance agencies ability to serve veterans, active military, and their families through local arts programming. This year, we supported 33 projects and invested more than \$300,000 through these grants.

The work of our grantees is making a difference in communities across California. Today we’re proud to showcase a few stories illustrating the power of arts and creative expression to support, encourage, and in some cases, heal, our former servicemen and women.

DIAVOLO – Architecture in Motion

Currently, DIAVOLO dance company is offering Los Angeles Veterans a one-of-a-kind immersive dance experience. After nine DIAVOLO movement workshops for Veterans, the company chose eight Veterans to be a part of their engagement experience. During a period of four months, these eight individuals rehearse at a professional dance studio three times a week under the direction of DIAVOLO Artistic Director, Jacques Heim, and Institute Director, Dusty Alvarado. DIAVOLO company dancers are also present, offering a true, professional dance company experience.

During these rehearsals, the eight Veterans are trained, educated, and encouraged to create material that allows them to express themselves in new ways. The final product of these rehearsals is a showing of a piece, but the process of getting to that point is at the core of this program.



Chris was active duty in Iraq 10 years ago. Following his service, he joined the Los Angeles Police Department. He has since then resigned on medical leave. Constantly struggling with PTSD, he has sought after doctors and therapists. After two weeks in our studio, Chris called Institute Director, Dusty Alvarado and said, “I’ve never felt more calm and more at peace in the past 10 years than when I am dancing with you guys.”

Alvarado shared that the entire organization of DIAVOLO has become a part of this experience. “The Veteran participants see this, are honored by it, and take even greater pride in the work they are doing here. We are showing up and saying ‘this is important to us. We want to highlight you guys in the best way we know how... through dance.’ We have created a safe place for these individuals where their voices can be heard.” Alvarado hopes this place helps them feel more grounded and more comfortable as they work on making the transition into civilian life.

The work of DIAVOLO is known to be intense, highly athletic, and daring. They are considered “warriors of dance.” Alvarado shared, “It only made sense that we would one day work with Veterans—intense, athletic, daring individuals. We did not take it easy on our Veterans. We pushed them past their own limits to what only we knew they could achieve.”

Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego

For several years, the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego (MCASD) has implemented ArtOASIS, a program supporting the recovery of military personnel from the symptoms of combat-related stress. The partnership joins MCASD with Combat Arts San Diego to serve more than 75 active duty troops each year who are enrolled in the Overcoming Adversity and Stress Injury Support (OASIS) program of the Naval Medical Center San Diego.



Combat-related stress is an issue of great concern for the social and economic health of San Diego County—home to the largest concentration of military personnel and their families in the nation. Through ArtOASIS, more than 75 active-duty military enrolled in the OASIS Program at the Naval Medical Center experience regular outings to the calming environment and gardens of the Museum, evidence-based recreational therapy rooted in the arts, and the opportunity to have their artwork displayed in the museum galleries.

Education Curator Cris Scorza shares that ArtOASIS teaching artists have witnessed service members giving substance and voice to feelings and thoughts through different artistic media with positive effects. “The art classes provide a relaxed, non-clinical environment where they can relax and talk as peers. The art making process itself gives them the ability to control, articulate and externalize their negative experiences in a constructive way.”

Cris has seen personnel who have come into the program with prior art experience who have flourished in that setting, as well as personnel without any prior experience be surprised at how beneficial the creative process is. One special case was Carl, who at the beginning of his participation Carl was withdrawn. In his military service, Carl made bombs and received many awards for this skill. But in his time in treatment, he began to wonder how this skill would serve him in the future. Many of the participants shared this anxiety. What will follow military service? How will they restructure their lives? Responding to such questions was an essential aspect of the program.



As the teaching artists began to connect with Carl and showed him that they believed in his ability to have a future after the military, he began to gain confidence. Toward the end of the project, Carl was asking questions about drawing and writing as an option for his future and for sharing his story. He became excited about developing new skills. The art practice was just a vehicle for conversation. The true outcomes of this project were the personal connections the troops and artists developed, which allowed them to open up about nurturing innate talent, sharing personal narratives, and planning for civilian life.

As an added component, one OASIS graduate is serving as a teaching assistant with the mentoring of ArtOASIS teaching artists. He teaches from a place that is collegial with an understanding of the military approach. He has introduced tool-based art making to the new participants—a method that is both familiar and highly empathetic. ArtOASIS will continue to support graduates becoming teaching assistants as a way of demonstrating that both art and teaching are viable careers as service men and women transfer to the civilian world. ArtOASIS teaching assistants are paid an hourly rate and can translate the skills and teaching experience acquired in the position to work in other settings.

Yuba Sutter Arts

In the town of Marysville, veterans and local artists collaborated to create a large-scale, community art installation telling the story of the veteran experience:

Alameda County Arts Commission

With California Arts Council support, the Alameda County Arts Commission is providing a series of art activities integrated into events and counseling groups at the Oakland Vet Center that serves Alameda County Veterans. The goals are to provide Veterans with opportunities to express themselves in a supportive environment, develop art making skills, engage in community building, and strengthen partner and family bonds. The project includes displays at veteran service and civic venues.

Program Coordinator Violet Juno feels this work is important because there is such strong positive response from the Veterans community about incorporating art and the creative process into their services. “The Veterans, their readjustment counselors and Veteran service organization staff are very interested in partnering together to explore how the arts can support Veterans in their readjustment journey,” Violet shared. “This project creates a way for the Alameda County Arts Commission to provide support and expertise to this important part of our local community.”

Veterans participating in the program share that they find art making to be meditative, healing and empowering. One female Veteran participated in a workshop with her two teenage children and shared “We liked this. It’s therapeutic! We’d like to do it again.” Another young female Veteran added that “this art experience helps me get out of my comfort zone, meet people, and try new things.” And some participants have enjoyed using personal strengths from their military service in the art making process. “I like the teamwork needed for this project. I like the camaraderie and seeing what we can accomplish together,” a male Veteran, age 67 shared.
