



IMAGE COURTESY OF DREW CAMERON

The fabric of war

Veterans use their military uniforms to create artwork, heal hidden wounds

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PHOTO BY JOE GLODE

Above: Ryan Stroud, who has worked to train performers on The Moth Radio Hour, is working with veterans to tell their stories for "Veterans' Voices," coming to Portland this month.

A group of Portland-area veterans is preparing to dismantle the uniforms its members wore while serving in the military – first, by shredding the fabric with scissors and box cutters, and then by beating the strips of cloth into an unrecognizable pulp.

But they aren't trying to desecrate their uniforms.

They're reclaiming them.

Coping with the brutal violence and hardship of war can take many forms, but as the United States loses between 18 and 22 veterans a day to suicide and many more to substance abuse, finding healthy ways to cope continues to be crucial.

Across the country, veterans are finding that through art and storytelling, they can embark on their journey toward recovery. They are coming together to publically share their experiences, and in some cases, they're completely transforming their uniforms in a beautifully symbolic exercise of reclamation.

It began in 2007 when Drew Cameron, an

Iraq war veteran, and Drew Matott, a paper artist, co-founded the Combat Paper Project in San Francisco. Since then, the organization has conducted workshops worldwide, helping to heal veterans through the process of turning their military uniforms into paper. The paper then serves as a base for screen prints, sculpture, bookmaking and poetry.

For veterans, the act of cutting up the cloth that clung to their bodies as they fought, sweated and struggled through military service, is a way of releasing emotions tied to that part of their past. Turning that cloth into their own artistic expression is a way of reclaiming the uniform and, for some, reclaiming a part of themselves.

Cameron says the underlying premise of Combat Paper is to bring together the veteran and nonveteran communities, and he's made the project his life's work. For the past eight years he says he's traveled the country, visiting prisons, military bases, museums and universities, teaching thousands of veterans how to transform their uniforms.

In April, Combat Paper Project will take

part in a series of free events in Portland, including an art talk, exhibits, a storytelling event with local veterans and an interactive art project where spectators can watch Cameron and other veterans create paper from the fibers of uniforms.

Six student veterans and active service members at Portland State University will participate in the Combat Paper process with Cameron during his Portland visit. The exercise is part of a series of storytelling workshops that will culminate with a free, storytelling performance on April 22 at 7 p.m. in the Smith Memorial Student Ballroom at PSU. Their transformed uniforms will be on display at the event, "Veterans' Voices."

Performance organizer Ryan Stroud has taught several of the top performers on the widely acclaimed radio program, The Moth Radio Hour, and he says "Veterans' Voices" will be of the same caliber.

"It will be punchy, apt and personal," says Stroud. "The audience will gasp and they will sigh. It will be an emotional experience."

At top: A piece was created by Combat Paper Project co-founder and Iraq war veteran Drew Cameron. It was part of series of prints appearing in the multimedia project, "Beyond Zero: 1914-1918."

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