

Operation

SHARING THEIR TRUTH

Veterans move to create community, invite dialogue

BY SUZI STEFFEN

They love to hang out together. They make dinner, play video games, speak of absent friends. They tease each other constantly, sometimes yelling across campus to (or at) each other. Some jump at loud noises. Some hold their anger in. Some walk away from political discussions; some engage with other students about the election, foreign policy — and the wars.

And as they reveal one part of their histories, other students ask them things:

What was it like in basic training?

Why did you sign up?

Did you ever get to kill anyone?

“Yeah, they ask it like that,” says Josh Coombs. “I can’t count the number of times I’ve been asked that.” The 22-year-old LCC student and former Marine rolls his eyes. The other veterans, students at the UO, agree: What a question.

But they have queries for themselves as well:

Will I be going back?

Will the pain ever go away?

Was it worth it?

One veteran is majoring in Italian and theater, planning to go into the Peace Corps. One hasn’t been deployed yet but knows he faces six years in the Navy after graduation. One, injured in basic training, helps counsel fellow veterans who have trouble with drugs or alcohol abuse.

And now, after working with hope and dedication since last spring, they’re taking their stories to the stage. On the weekend of Feb. 8-10 at the Veterans Memorial Hall, the UO’s Veterans and Family Student Association (VFSA) embarks on a unique theater and community project that gives veterans a voice. Their play, free and open to the public, shares parts of their stories with a town some of them say seems eager to see them as cartoons, stereotypes instead of real people.

Responsibility to Help

Telling, a play written by former UO staff member Jonathan Wei and current Ph.D. student Max Rayneard, started life last year after a series of veterans’ panels on the UO campus. Wei, then the VFSA student advisor, started thinking about something that was a bit more directed. Sometimes the same three or four people would be at each panel, and sometimes the questions felt offensive. “If it’s a smart question, we would answer it with dignity,” says Army veteran and UO senior Lemuel Charley. “But if it’s a nonsense question ...” He shakes his head.



SHIRLEY
CORTEZ

VFSA co-director Shane Addis, a Marine veteran who served in Iraq after his freshman year at the UO, appreciated the chance to talk in the panels, but he knew the play would help combat stereotypes. The 11 cast members — eight men and three women; two Army, three Navy, three Marines, one Air Force, one recruit and one civilian spouse — say that they want to give the Eugene/Springfield community something new to think about.

Sean Jin agrees. He’s a UO senior headed into the Navy’s Officer Candidate School after he graduates with a degree in economics. Jin serves as the activities coordinator for the VFSA, which means he’s usually running errands, sending out press releases and considering the advice his elders give him.

“They see us as one of two stereotypes,” Jin says. “One is that every veteran is pro-war, pro-government, and the other side is that vets are completely disillusioned, anti-war, maybe homeless.”

“Or they even see us as just completely anti-establishment,” adds Jason Alves. Alves, a marine biology major at the UO, spent four years in the Navy after high school to help pay for college. He’s vocal about disagreeing with some of the other vets’ political opinions, but, he says, “Our respect for each other transcends our opinions and lifestyles.”

They don’t share a common political point of view. They don’t share class, race, gender or religious backgrounds; they don’t all have the same branch of the service in common. And they represent far more veterans than appear on stage.

Wei and Rayneard, in consultation with the veterans, set up the questions for



SHANE ADDIS

the oral history-like interviews: *Why did you join the service? Tell us about basic training. What was your service like? What’s it been like coming back home?*

Over the summer, 24 student veterans told their stories to the writers and the camera. Charley, a digital arts major who served in the first Gulf War, Haiti and Bosnia as a paratrooper and heavy equipment engineer, recorded more than 40 hours of their answers. Charley holds hero status with many of the others; his stories have entertained and educated them at every turn. “It’s creating a dialogue between our community and the rest of the community,” Charley says.

The play used to be called *True*, but over winter break, the veterans decided it made more sense to call it *Telling*. The show consists of them, alone and together, speaking their stories and those of others who couldn’t be in the play. But each monologue, each carefully constructed scene, tells more than their particular tales.

(Don’t) Talk About It

Play director John Schmor, the chair of the UO’s theater department, laughs when he remembers what Wei and Rayneard told him last summer. “We’ll have you a script by September,” they said. He’s amazed, he says, that they could “farm through” so much material and still keep their energy going as they wrote. Schmor and the actors saw a more finished script late in fall term, long after Wei moved to another job and another life in Austin, Texas.

Wei makes that long trek back to Eugene to help Rayneard work out final details as the weeks tick down toward performance. Their words tumble out as the two of them speak about how the experience has moved them, how passionate the students are. Wei and Rayneard are clearly devoted to the veterans who opened up and trusted the writers with their life stories. And the two of them — liberal, interested in social justice — have done what good listeners do: They’ve taken on others’ belief systems in pursuit of art and the truth as the students



SUMMER INTERVIEWS