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Organizations Help Veterans Heal Through Writing Their Stories



Robin Seaton Jefferson Contributor ⓘ

It's been said that the brave men and women who serve their country live on with the war inside them.

And though those of us who have not served can never truly empathize with them, organizations around the country are encouraging veterans to tell their stories, regardless if whether doing so will deepen our understanding or deliver them from from some of their scars.



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The Veteran Writing Workshops are a state-wide program offered by the [Missouri Humanities Council \(MHC\)](#), which in turn partners with the [VA St. Louis Health Care System](#), the [St. Louis Public Library](#), the [Kansas City Public Library](#), and [Drury University](#) to offer veteran writing workshops to veterans and their families – teaching them the writing and narrative skills needed to better share their stories.

Started in 2014, the free workshops are taught by professional writers and provide the high level of instruction of a college or university writing course. The workshop at the St. Louis Public Library, for example, is taught by Kent Walker, an U.S. Army combat veteran who holds a master’s degree in writing.

Morris said the writing workshops are open to all ages, though the majority of attendees in St. Louis have been Vietnam War veterans-seniors now in their seventies-some who until now haven't been able to tell their stories for whatever the reason.

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A motorcyclists transfer a name of a deceased soldier at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial during the 30th anniversary of the Rolling Thunder 'Ride for Freedom' demonstration in Washington, Sunday, May 28, 2017. Rolling Thunder seeks to bring full accountability for all U.S. prisoners of war and missing in action (POW/MIA) soldiers. (AP Photo/Cliff Owen)

“Veterans have a unique story to tell and civilians need to know what they’ve gone through,” said Scott Morris, manager of popular materials at the St. Louis Public Library, a former Marine and son to a Vietnam War veteran. “This is one of the ways to get their stories to them. Having been a veteran—though I did not serve in combat—I know that veterans do not always share a lot with people who haven’t been there. Especially since Vietnam, there’s a reluctance for veterans to open up to people who haven’t experienced what they have. It’s important though because we know that if they talk about it, it makes it better for them. It’s important that they tell their stories whether or not those stories are ever told to the public.”



Scott Morris, manager of popular materials at the St. Louis Public Library, a former Marine and the son of a Vietnam Veteran. (PHOTO COURTESY OF SCOTT MORRIS)

Nevertheless the stories of veterans are being shared both with their families and with the public because of this and other programs. The MHC, the Warrior Arts Alliance and Southeast Missouri State University Press, for example, created a series of anthologies titled “[Proud to Be: Writing by American Warriors](#),” which preserves and shares military service perspectives of soldiers and veterans of all conflicts and of their families. They say it is not only an outlet for artistic expression, but also a document of the unique aspects of wartime in United States history.



Veterans learn to write their stories at the St. Louis Public Library. (PHOTO COURTESY OF SCOTT MORRIS, ST. LOUIS PUBLIC LIBRARY)

It's no secret that writing and other forms of art can be therapeutic. And one soldier is making it his mission to help others with writing their stories. In her article for *Soldiers Magazine*, “[Owning your story: How writing helps veterans heal](#),” Jacqueline M. Hames tells the story of how 25-year-veteran soldier, Ron Capps founded the Veterans Writing Project (VWP) in Washington D.C. After two tours in Afghanistan, as well as service in Iraq, Rwanda, Darfur and Kosovo.

Capps told Hames he “came very close to committing suicide – I was actually interrupted. I survived, obviously, and now I’m here. Writing helped me get control of my mind.”

Capps started the VWP in 2011 after suffering his own emotional turmoil from war which neither traditional therapy nor prescription medications seemed to relieve. A faculty member at the University of Maryland, Capps’ work has appeared in *Time*, *The American Interest*, *Foreign Policy*, *The New York Times*, *The Delmarva Review*, *JMWW*, *Little Patuxent Review*, *Prime Number* and *Riverlit*. Three of his essays have been listed as notable in *Best American Essays* in 2012, 2014 and 2015. His memoir, *Seriously Not All Right: Five Wars in Ten Years*, is published by Schaffner Press.

Capps’ book, “*Writing War: A Guide to Telling Your Own Story*,” serves as the curriculum for the VWP and can be taught as a traditional semester-long workshop class, or as an intensive two-day seminar. Capps seminars begin with questions such as: “Why do we write?” “Why do we bother?” and “What’s different about writing the military experience?”

Capps told Hames his story, like that of other soldiers is worth telling. “What happened to me, my experience, I think that I needed to write about it to get control of it, to control those memories. But I also, whether it’s true or not, actually believe that I have some kind of commentary on the human condition. What I experienced can explain the human cost, the individual human cost of the wars that I went through, and I think that’s worthwhile.”

The VWP is building an archive of writing by members of the military community via its website at veteranswriting.org. Organizers publish a quarterly literary review and an ongoing scroll of writing by veterans on its sister site, [O-Dark-Thirty](#).

Writing isn’t the only way the St. Louis Public Library is helping veterans share their stories. They also invite veterans to [explore the art of filmmaking](#) through the production of mini-documentaries designed specifically for veterans. The recordings explore a single small topic or subject in a three-minute succinct

manner and consist of at least two interviews, b-roll recorded by participants, voiceover and music. Instructors help participants use laptops and smartphones to create a video and construct a simple storyline. Participants also learn how to visualize their story through examination of cinematography practices and various editing techniques.

For more information on the VWP, contact Ron Capps, at ron@veteranswriting.org or at Veterans Writing Project, 2716 Linden Lane, Silver Spring MD 20910.

*I was the girl who stayed at grandma's table after the others went out to play. I relished stories like grandpa's tale of the American Indian woman who was laid to rest along the Santa Fe Trail in Kansas in an area that would become his front yard. I grew to become the you... **MORE***

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