

Making Connections with the Veterans Community

By Carolyn Marie Wright, Manager of Education & Community Engagement, Geffen Playhouse

(This post is a part of series highlighting the work of recipients of TCG's Blue Star Theatres grant program. Geffen Playhouse is a recipient of Blue Star Theatres grant funding to support its [Veterans Writing & Performance Workshop](#) program.)

My relationship with the veteran community has changed immensely in the last year. In amazing ways. In ways I never anticipated. In ways that have impacted me and encouraged me to continue my work with veterans and their families.

In September, 2015, I was appointed Manager of Education & Community Engagement at the Geffen Playhouse, where my responsibilities have included providing artistic and administrative support for the Veterans Writing & Performance Workshop. I had the privilege of spending four months with 15 remarkable individuals who served our country in the armed forces and a team of passionate, supportive Geffen Playhouse staff members who were committed to (1) empowering program participants to have a voice through writing and performing monologues, (2) helping participants turn their experiences into assets that can educate and inspire others, and (3) bridging veterans' communities into other Geffen Playhouse communities. We met weekly under the guidance of Workshop Director April Fitzsimmons, a veteran herself, and participants explored the theme of "heroism" through writing and acting activities. Though I was not involved directly as a participant, I absolutely felt included in the ensemble, and I knew that my view of "the veteran's experience" was about to change.

My family is not a "traditional" military family. Or so I thought. Turns out there is no "traditional" military family. American soldiers and veterans come from all walks of life, and the idea of "family" comes in many different forms. A year ago, I naively considered myself outside of the military and veteran community. I thought: sure, I support our troops, I respect people who have served, but I don't know much about that world because I'm not a part of it. Turns out I am more connected than I initially thought. First of all, I stepped outside of my (then) narrow view and acknowledged that I have several family members who served: maternal grandfather (WWII), paternal grandfather (WWII), maternal uncle (drafted for Vietnam but never deployed due to pre-service injury), stepfather (Vietnam), and long term boyfriend (Iraq deployment cancelled). I've always known this information, but I never truly connected with it.

During my first session as workshop manager with Geffen Playhouse Veterans Writing & Performance Workshop, my mindset immediately shifted. It was the first time in my entire life that I was in a room filled with veterans. In fact, I was in the minority; I was the only non-veteran in the room. I wanted to learn as much as I could about their life experiences—before, during, and after military service. So I listened. I observed. I took every opportunity to say hello and connect on breaks and during lunch. After one session with these 15 individuals, I knew that this workshop was something special. I listened as these men and women talked about their grandmothers, their partners, their teachers who influenced them, their friends and loved ones, and even those people who did not believe in them yet somehow sparked a fire for them to succeed. We all shared something in common; we wanted to tell our stories and help others see life from different points of view. No wonder I never made any connection to the veteran

community previously; I had never put myself in a room with veterans.

As the workshop continued, my admiration and respect for the veteran community continued to grow. I felt proud that I was able to support the workshop group artistically and administratively—and personally. Working together in the arts can lead to amazing things. Entertainment. Understanding. Dialogue. Empathy. Connection. I may not understand what it means to be a veteran first-hand; however, I do appreciate and support the veteran’s experience. I want to help returning veterans reintegrate. I want to listen when a veteran tells a story about boot camp. I want to be in the audience when a young man is brave enough to write a story about his suicide attempt after leaving the service and then stands onstage in front of 500 people to show us how great life can be when you ask for help. I want to make connections and inspire others to do the same.

My participation in the Geffen Playhouse Veterans Writing & Performance Workshop may only look like four months “on the books,” but I know that the lasting effects will stay with me and all who participated as artists, staff, and audience members. I consider myself a well-educated, well-traveled person, and yet this experience illustrated that there are always more opportunities to learn. Community engagement is so important because it exposes people to all walks of life. I am thankful for my new friends and colleagues in the veteran community, and I look forward to continuing the work together.

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Carolyn Marie Wright’s extensive service in the performing arts has reached non-profit organizations, academic institutions, and entertainment entities throughout Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, and New Haven. She earned her B.A. in Theatre Studies (Yale University), M.A. in Educational Theatre (New York University’s Steinhardt School), and M.F.A. in Acting (UCLA’s School of Theatre, Film, and Television). Clients have included: MCC Theatre, New Victory Theater, UCLA Arts Bridge, Will Geer Theatricalum Botanicum, The Second City, and Yale Children’s Theater. She is an Adjunct Professor in Theatre Arts at Moorpark College. In September, 2015, Carolyn was appointed Manager of Education & Community Engagement at the Geffen Playhouse, where her responsibilities have included providing artistic and administrative support for the Veterans Writing & Performance Workshop.

Theatre Communications Group (TCG), the national service organization for theatre, and Blue Star Families, the country’s largest chapter-based military families non-profit organization, are pleased to support the second round of the Blue Star Theatres Grant Program. Through support from MetLife Foundation, the Grant Program funds efforts that deepen the relationship between participating Blue Star Theatres and their local military community: veterans, children of active duty military, military spouses, and/or active duty military. Each theatre received \$5,000 to support activities that could include talkbacks, outreach programs, sponsored tickets, performances, playwriting workshops, readings, or workshops that focus on military themes and service.

