

Grounded in Reality

By Danielle Ward

Literary Manager and Producer of the San Diego REPeritory's production of *Grounded*

Photo by Natalie Khuen,
Pictured: Heather Ramey

(This [blog post](#) is a part of series highlighting the work of recipients of TCG's [Blue Star Theatres grant program](#). San Diego REPeritory Theatre is the recipient of Blue Star Theatres grant funds supporting a production of *Grounded*.)

San Diego is home to 7 military bases which serve a combined population of military personnel, dependents and families of approximately 175,000 people. So when director Emilie Whelan and actress Heather Ramey approached the San Diego REPeritory Theatre about producing their production of George Brant's multi-layered, military-themed play *Grounded*, we asked ourselves how we could take this show to the community that would resonate the most with it. With support from the TCG/Blue Star Theatres grant, we planned to tour 3-4 free performances on several of the local military bases, followed by a post-show talk-back with the director and actress. Our goal was to reach into the military community, meeting military where they live and work, since one of the challenges had been getting military families to attend a show in our theatre.

We anticipated that touring a theatrical production on local military bases would come with some new challenges. That is why in our grant request we included support for a military liaison—someone who knew the ins and outs of the military protocol and had contacts on each base. Amanda Yerum, the Blue Star Families event coordinator that served as our liaison, was crucial to the success of this project. She knew what worked and what didn't in terms of booking an event on base and warned us that several of the avenues that would take more time to work through than the 2 ½-3 months we had before the required grant completion date.

Right away, instead of trying to approach the on base PR departments, we aimed to for the community centers within the military family housing areas on or near the bases since they didn't have as many hoops for

approval. This worked particularly well at Camp Pendleton where Amanda worked. She folded our show into an event specifically targeting spouses on Military Spouse Appreciation Day (resulting in 45 attendees.) However, the Lincoln Housing coordinator who oversaw community centers at all other bases the San Diego area, was interested in the project, but surprised us with so many steps (such as registering us as vendors and dealing with insurance concerns) that again there wasn't enough time to arrange everything.

We also approached a non-traditional base (Balboa Hospital) and were excited about the initial response from the Naval Medical Center San Diego's Deputy Public Affairs Officer, but once we started to get into the detailed questions, he suggested we contact either the ASYMCA or the Morale, Welfare and Recreation (MWR) department to finalize the event. But when it became clear we were starting over from square one with folks who weren't used to dealing with a request like ours, our time-clock for confirming the venue ran out.

Even with the help of Amanda, our secret insider weapon, we ran-up against an enormous amount of problems that made us once again shift our thinking. As our deadline loomed, we called local museums (like the Veteran's Museum and the Air and Space Museum) but discovered they booked over a year in advance. We got creative about venues and our most fruitful option became the Veteran's Village of San Diego, where The Old Globe theatre had previously toured shows. Since it is a residential treatment center for veterans with drug and alcohol related dependency, it was a closed performance, but we had an audience of over 100 since attendance was mandatory.

We booked the third performance at our own Lyceum Theater, marketing it as one of our 40th anniversary special events. It garnered a mixed crowd of 120 military and civilians. All of the performances were free, but this was the only show that was open to the public. The May 17th performance came right on the tail-end of Armed Forces Week, so it was a good way to honor our military, veterans and their families.

As an interesting side note—when we called the military person in charge of PR for the entire region to ask that he spread the word about our show, he noted that he would have to run the event and all of our details by his legal department. Apparently, when you offer something free to the military, it can create some legal issues. It was less of a problem since we were offering free tickets to everyone, not just military, but he said he still had to have legal approve it before he put out the information to anyone on the bases.

While the reality of producing this show with this audience in mind proved to be a bigger challenge than we anticipated, the result was worth it. Those spouses, veterans and military members (and many civilians) who attended overwhelmingly noted being impacted by the performance. Frequently used words included: inspiring, eye-opening, mind-blowing, fascinating, exhilarating, intense, emotional, realistic and funny. Plus, the experience revealed the need/desire for plays that explore the reality of the military community. It was a beautiful example of what theatre could and should do.

Our liaison Amanda noted: "When I first heard about the play, I thought it would be an interesting performance to see as a prior service member and a spouse. I went in thinking I knew exactly how the actress would pretend to feel. There was nothing she could say or do that would shock me—been there, done that. Yet, I also felt that the performance would be beneficial to the spouses in the community. I wanted them to see what their husband and wives do on a daily basis. I wanted them to understand that there is emotion, sickness, fear, strength, drama and sacrifice involved in every aspect of their service members 'job.' But what I got from actually watching the performance was so much more than what I expected. I was impressed that the character's

involvement and her language actually helped me see what she was seeing and feeling and ultimately, I felt a deeper connection to my active-duty husband because of it.”

She was not the only one. The other spouses in the Pendleton audience clearly felt that same connection. Actress Heather Ramey talked with this extremely engaged audience after the show reporting, “They responded that they had a better understanding of their spouses after seeing the play, specifically relating to issues dealing with PTSD and the issues that come with transitioning home. They felt like they saw into the mental and emotional space of their spouses’ jobs. One even said, ‘I’m going to go home and kiss my husband right now!’”

And that paled in comparison to the response Heather got at Veteran’s Village. Because the audience had experienced first-hand what they witnessed on stage, the interaction between performer and audience made the room crackle. During the performance, audience responses included deep breaths, sighs and verbal call outs like “that’s right” “oh no” or “oh yeah,” which fueled the actress to a new level of emotional resonance.

In the talk-back, the audience shared their realities with Heather (and noted their surprise that she had not been in the military.) "One man shared that he did drone work in Afghanistan offering, ‘You got that part about watching the screen exactly right. You just sit there and blow people up on the screen.’ Another shared how he felt my frustration about being assigned to the *chair force*—he felt he hadn’t been able to do the service he had wanted to. One man asked about the play shedding light on the comparison between video games and our disassociation from humanity. And one other veteran related to the part where my spouse told me to get counseling, admitting, ‘That’s what my wife said to me...that’s why I’m here.’”

Some notable statistics from the Veteran’s Village survey: 13% said this was their first theatrical experience; 90% noted they were extremely satisfied by the performance; 86% reported being likely to see another theatrical piece in the future; and 53% said the play introduced them to an issue, idea or point of view that they hadn’t fully considered.

We were ultimately thrilled with the results from this touring production and are excited to share this piece with a wider audience at the Without Walls (WoW) Festival presented by the La Jolla Playhouse in October 2015.



*Danielle Ward is the Literary Manager at San Diego REPertory Theatre, where she also recently produced *Grounded* throughout 2015.*

Theatre Communications Group (TCG), the national organization for theatre, and Blue Star Families, the country’s largest chapter-based military families non-profit organization, are pleased to support the inaugural 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.

