

# Steppenwolf Vets' Night

By Eric Van Tassell

(This [blog post](#) is a part of series highlighting the work of recipients of TCG's [Blue Star Theatres grant program](#). Steppenwolf Theatre Company is the recipient of Blue Star Theatre grant funding to support their Veterans' Night program.)

The Veterans' Night series at Steppenwolf Theatre Company is a well-established program. In 1984, co-founder Gary Sinise directed *Tracers*, which was written by an ensemble of actors who served in Vietnam and veterans came by the hundreds. From *Tracers* on, Steppenwolf has honored veterans with a free performance and dinner at the final dress rehearsal of each of our five subscription series plays. It is a tradition that we are proud lives on to this day.

My personal involvement with the Veterans' Night began in 2012 when I started working in Steppenwolf's Development Department and started coordinating our volunteers for this series of events. One of my favorite parts of working and attending the Veterans' Night series is the opportunity to personally connect with our guests. Many of them have fascinating stories to tell.

During a recent Veterans Night I met three vets in particular: Michael, Joseph and James. Michael served in the Navy doing sonar work. Joseph served as a Marine. James served in the Army. They each had interesting stories to share. Michael served mostly on a destroyer in the 80's. He told me about a time that his crew was doing exercises off of California and his sonar work picked up a Russian sub. Their destroyer was immediately activated and followed the sub for three months all the way back to Russia. Joseph's Marine career was during peacetime in the 80's. He was stationed in California and talked about guarding high level hangars. He also mentioned that his father, who was in the Army, had landed at Normandy on D-Day and just died a couple of weeks ago at the age of 93. James served in Iraq in the northern part of the country. He did one tour and was there for about a year.

Later that same evening, when there was a break in the food service line, I noticed a gentleman who had finished his meal and decided to take the time to go up to each of our volunteers and thank them for their efforts. He saw me and came over to thank me as well. I shook his hand and made it clear that we were the ones thanking him and his comrades for their service. The man's name was Milton Taylor III and he served in the Army for 15 years including the Vietnam War. Milton thanked us for caring for veterans in a way that not all civilians do. He talked about how some civilians can't understand when their loved one goes and serves and comes back a changed person. He said that he had suffered a brain injury in the service and that dealing with that can be challenging. But he wanted us all to be sure that we knew how much he and his fellow veterans appreciate civilians taking the time to care for those who have served on behalf of our nation.

It is interactions like this that help instill in me the value that the Veterans' Night series has to our guests and our community. Steppenwolf Theatre Company thanks TCG and the Blue Star Theatres program for their support of this critical program. We look forward to partnering again in the future and seeing your program grow.



*Eric Van Tassell is Steppenwolf's Corporate and Foundation Associate. He has been with Steppenwolf since December of 2012. While he is passionate about Steppenwolf, its mission and his work in the Development Department, he will be leaving the organization during the summer of 2015 as he heads back to school to earn a Master of Fine Arts in Lighting Design from the University of Illinois. One of the things he will miss the most from his time at Steppenwolf is working with the Veterans' Night Series.*

*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.*

