

By Mara McGhee, Community Programs Coordinator, Alley Theatre

(This post is a part of series highlighting the work of recipients of TCG's Blue Star Theatres grant program. Alley Theatre is a recipient of Blue Star Theatres grant funding to support the most recent iteration of their First Draft program, which introduced veterans to the craft of playwriting and offered participants [the opportunity to tell their stories to an audience.](#))

Alley Theatre is honored to be part of the Blue Star Family. As our organization continues to develop more robust programs, we are encouraged to continue to offer programming to our veteran community. We have previously worked with The Telling Project, which is an organization that specializes in theatricalizing veterans' stories. We took our First Draft program and applied it to the veteran community. First Draft utilizes a mix of personal narrative and creative non-fiction techniques to help individuals write a story. The curriculum includes physical, vocal, and focus exercises to allow participants to gain skills to help with the presentational aspect of their work. The program can be easily utilized by anyone. We have previously used this writing program to assist future first-generation college students in writing application essays.



The program was originally designed based on a problem we kept hearing: that, for many people, the scariest part of writing is figuring out how to begin. We take this fear away by giving different prompts on different topics and allowing participants to simply put their thoughts onto paper. We are truly looking for a “first draft.” We emphasize that this process does not have to result in a perfectly crafted story. Throughout the process, participants talk to one another about what they have written—an important step, as some people find that talking about their writing, along with hearing what others have written, prompts ideas they can then utilize.

Another key program component is the use of theatre games that concentrate on focus, physicality, and vocal techniques throughout the process. This allows participants to develop confidence in their ability to present their story. This also builds trust within the room, so that they are comfortable presenting and sharing some of the more intimate aspects of their stories.

The planning process of this endeavor started off a little bumpy. We wanted to find participants who were willing to meet on a weekly basis for four to six weeks. Finding people who were available was a little more difficult than we expected. People have busy lives, and the thought of going up on stage to tell 100 strangers your story that you've been holding in your heart takes a different kind of bravery. We reiterated to potential participants that this program was more about process rather than product. We wanted to help them find the words. The presentation was always an optional component that they could choose not to do.



Fortunately we found participants. (Spoiler alert: they all opted to present their stories!) The four weeks in the workshop were very important. Participants came in with different levels of experience and stories. Some had a full story they were ready to share, while some came in with nothing. The intimacy of the workshop brought them closer together. They built trust within the group. They even had little squabbles and made up. In the end, they knew how to trust each other, how to give and receive feedback, and how to tell a story.

After the workshop portion of the program, we had some time for each of the participants to work one-on-one with the director of The Telling Project. He took 90 minutes to edit, frame, and work with each presenter. The presenters found it extraordinarily helpful to have this time to polish their work.



The presentation was phenomenal. We had stories all over the emotional spectrum. The audience laughed and cried during the evening. The participants grew in confidence, and their ability to hold the attention of an audience deepened. While the presenters were still at different levels of storytelling and confidence, they had improved leaps and bounds. They came away from the experience satisfied and stronger. We hope this is an experience we will be able to do again, as we continue to hone our practices and make them more impactful for the participants, the audiences, and our community.



Mara McGhee is the Alley Theatre's Community Programs Coordinator. She works in the Education and Community Engagement department to facilitate all community partnerships and programs, including the oversight of the First Draft program with various constituencies.

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 third 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.



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