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ART THAT HEALS

By Christina Cardona

At Brooklyn VA, Creative Arts Therapist Helps Veterans Cope with Military Trauma Through Art

Tensions were high as new patients sat around a large table, waiting to begin their very first art therapy class. These veterans fought in Iraq, Afghanistan and Vietnam, and over time have developed mental health issues such as PTSD and depression. Beryl Brenner entered the room and walked up to the window, to take in the view of the Verrazano Bridge. She handed out sheets of paper and colored sharpies, and asked them each to draw a picture of someone who makes them laugh.

There is silence in the room for 20 minutes, as each veteran drew this out. Once everyone was finished, they went around the room and explained to Brenner and the other veterans what they drew and what that meant to them. After they finished explaining, Brenner told each of them what the picture they drew might say about how they were feeling.

They laughed, a lot cried. In the end, to Brenner, it's all a part of the healing process.

According to the American Art Therapy Association, art therapy helps veterans with mental health needs, by providing emotional relief and encouraging expression of feelings and concerns. Artistic expression has been known to relieve depression and anxiety as well, and many art therapy patients show increased levels of self-esteem.

Brenner has had an interest in art throughout her life. Growing up in Manhattan, her parents wanted to expose her to the arts, and they would take Brenner and her two sisters to art museums across the city. She attended Brooklyn College, earning bachelor's and master's degrees in art.

The daughter of a World War II veteran, Brenner says she has always had a soft spot for veterans. But she came of age at a time when the Vietnam War was raging and not all veterans received a hero's welcome.

“Our people did not mix with veterans in those days,” Brenner said. “It's a little hard to imagine this for a young person in a different generation, because today's veterans, like the Iraq, Afghanistan veterans, they're accepted by anyone in school or outside of school. In those days it was quite different. There was a lot of bias against the Vietnam vets, a lot of divisions in the country.”

Despite the controversy, Brenner decided to volunteer at the Brooklyn VA in Bay Ridge, helping pioneer an art therapy program there. The first patient she ever saw was a soldier in a hospital bed with no legs and no arms. Even so, that soldier willingly took the paintbrush she offered in his mouth, and painted a picture. It was a pivotal moment for Brenner. She decided to dedicate her life to helping veterans express themselves through art. She started the program 11 years ago, but has a 40-year career working with veterans and the arts across the city.

“The arts give them the avenue to tell that story,” Brenner said. “There are people that are very verbal and there are people that are nonverbal, but they still have a story to tell. The arts provide them with that opportunity.”

A typical art therapy session is about an hour, but Brenner said they always go over that time. Brenner begins with a concept and then the veterans draw out how they are feeling and their response to that idea. A theme could be “sisters” or “who is your hero?” Participants then explain their drawing.

Brenner’s analysis is woven into the discussion that follows, teasing out the symbolism in the art. In one case, Brenner noted that the eyes in a drawing had no pupils. One interpretation, she suggested, was that that artist “doesn’t want to see things for what they are.” A veteran who drew someone bigger than himself might mean that he has a high regard for that person. Brenner said what’s most important is that they do all of this as a group, for the sake of opening up and talking through certain feelings and emotions.

“Because we work in groups, there is the social aspect or the camaraderie of the process, which is great because sometimes when a guy or gal comes back from a military, if they've had trauma or something, they're a little isolationist. So, the fact of having a community of other artists, it's a big, big deal for all,” Brenner said.

“When I joined the military, I guess I lost it because, you know, a lot of things stayed in my head and stuff like that,” said Rafael Antonio Justiniano, a U.S. Army Veteran who served in Operation Desert Storm. “So, when I got here, Beryl was the first person to approach me. [Art therapy] helped me bring my creativeness back out.”

The artwork produced in Brenner’s classes has been shown throughout the city. It’s important, Brenner said, that the public is aware of the talent and stories of these veterans, but it is also meaningful to veterans. The group has shown art at over 25 venues, including the National Landmark and Smithsonian Affiliate Snug Harbor, the Cullen Gallery at MOMA, the Trustee Room at the former location of the Whitney Museum, the Library of Congress, the Vietnam Veterans Education Center, public art with DOT UrbanArt at Brooklyn’s MetroTech Center and an exhibition at Calverton Cemetery in honor of the women veterans. There’s also a permanent gallery at the VA hospital.

“I think it gives the artists pleasure. It’s a funny group I run. No matter how deep the topics can get at times, we always like to have kind of a loose, fun atmosphere in the room. I play music, we crack jokes with each other. Nobody’s judgmental. Nobody’s allowed to insult anybody,” Brenner said. “It’s a very pleasant atmosphere to be in, where you can just concentrate on the creative.”

Brenner retired in November of 2018, though she plans to return as a volunteer.

Slideshow text:

Above: The Brooklyn Public Library celebrated Veterans Day on Nov. 8, 2017 with an exhibition titled, "I am History." The event showcased 19 pieces of artwork made by veterans in the art therapy program at the Brooklyn Campus of the Department of Veteran Affairs New York Harbor Healthcare System. Beryl Brenner, who pioneered the program at the Brooklyn VA, says the program offers a creative way for veterans who may have experienced trauma during their service to heal. At this event, Brenner handed over a digital archive of the art created in the program over the last 10 years to the Brooklyn Public Library.