

## 'Combat Hippies' to take the stage with personal stories

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Teo Castellanos, (left) an actor and director, talks to Hipolito Arriaga, (center left) and Anthony Torres, (center) and Andrew Cuthbert, (right) who are veterans, as they prepare for an upcoming poetry performance. Much of their material is inspired by their time in combat zones in Iraq.

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Under the canopy of the oak trees, in the lull of a Saturday afternoon, three veterans rehearse what will become performance art, an intensely personal show that offers a public peek into their lives, from childhood to combat to the post-military chapters.

Each has seen war. Each has come back with stories, some laid deep to rest. And each is ready to find some healing through the comfort and therapy of the arts.

“Post-traumatic growth rather than post-traumatic stress,” says Andrew Cuthbert, a Marine veteran who was based in Fallujah during the Iraq War. “You can’t erase the trauma but you can erase its effect on you. You can’t erase your scars, but don’t have to be defined by the scars.”

Since January, the veterans — a group of friends bound by the military and a love of prose — have participated in the MDC Live Arts Vets’ Lab, a series of Saturday workshops focused on creative writing and storytelling. All that personal expression is swathed in memories and finely tuned by actor, playwright and performer Teo Castellanos, who leads the weekly sessions. The result: an original performance scheduled for 3 p.m. Sunday at the Betsy Hotel’s BBar during the O, Miami poetry festival.

The piece, titled *Conscience Under Fire*, features the veterans’ solo and group work and is accompanied by deejay Brimstone127.

The live lab is part of MDC Live Arts’ initiative focused on veterans, including the South Florida premier of *BaseTrack*, a multi-disciplinary performance last month that examined the collective experience of military members and their families and a photo exhibition currently displayed at The Betsy. Organizers hope to continue the workshop program, which is supported by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, as part of its Knight Arts Challenge.

“We wanted our local vets to voice their experiences and to process their experiences through art,” says Jenni Person, managing producer of the MDC Live Arts program. “This is about their voices being heard and affirmed on stage. And for the non-vets, it’s about understanding more about those military experiences.”

The workshops included four veterans, most of whom served in combat zones in Iraq. One U.S. Army veteran who served as a mortuary affairs specialist travels from Daytona Beach twice a month to meet for the three-hour sessions on Saturdays. The idea was to funnel their life experiences, including military deployments, into written and spoken word as they bonded over universal stories of bootcamp, deployment, even desert sightings of camel spiders.

By the time Iraq veteran Sgt. Anthony Torres joined the U.S. Army, he had, in his own words, dropped out of college and had trouble keeping a job.

“Without any structure, I was distracted. I lost focus because I did not have an end game,” says Torres. “My father had served in the National Guard and firmly believed in serving our country and that the military would give me the kind of structure I needed.”

Torres, 33, deployed in 2004, working as a mental health specialist at the hospital in the Abu Ghraib prison. His job included assessing American soldiers to make sure they could manage the stresses of war. He returned home in 2005 grappling with all that he had seen and felt, all the emptiness and loneliness. The one thing that felt right was poetry. Three years ago, he organized an open mic event at the Miami VA.

“There are often these misconceptions and gaps in understanding the unique military culture and lifestyle. Reintegration for veterans proves difficult for most of us,” says Torres, who serves as the lab’s veteran coordinator. “At the same time, many of our feelings are common to the human condition. Love. Loss. Pain. Loneliness. Detachment. Alienation.”

Torres said offering honest stories helps the veterans process traumatic combat experience.

“One of the goals is to encourage the therapeutic value of reading, writing, performing and sharing stories about our combat experience,” says Torres, now a Barry University student studying social work. “This is a way of healing.”

Cuthbert, 28, served in the Marines five years, three months and one day – an escape from a harsh Broward neighborhood full of “high school drop-outs and drug addicts.” He deployed to Iraq, serving as a gunner and driver, along with working a personal security detail and handling communication for his convoy. Cuthbert returned to South Florida in 2009 looking for a way to manage his memories, specifically the singed image of a mother on the other side of his weapon.

“I felt guilty for many, many years. I almost shot a lady who appeared to be a threat – in front of her kids. Thankfully, she wasn’t a threat. I was 19 years old. After that, I felt extreme guilt, but I could not slow down,” says Cuthbert, who now teaches martial arts to children. “I came home thinking I should not be alive and nobody should be thanking me for my service. I felt like I left my humanity at war.”

Cuthbert said he poured much of his experiences into poetry, mostly in lines that rhymed. He had written about the pain of his childhood. When he began attending the workshops, both the memories and the style of poetry changed a bit.

“Before I began working with Teo, I had one specific poetry style. He was the one that taught me there is so much more to poetry than that. He helped me open up as an artist,” he says. “My first piece was about the happiest time of my childhood when I learned my mother was pregnant and the wonder of me thinking as a kid that my mom was making a brother *just* for me. I was so excited about becoming a big brother.”

The workshops came as Cuthbert was coming to terms with his identity and role as a man and a Marine, an evolution he calls post traumatic growth.

“I had already started my journey,” he says. “Working with on my individual pieces and with the others has helped me to clean my slate and process all my emotions.”

MDC Live Arts presents "Combat Hippies: Conscience Under Fire, 3 p.m. at BBar, at Betsy Hotel, 1440 Ocean Dr., Miami Beach. The showcase is free and open to the public.

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