

Coping through the camera

Program aims to help vets deal with stress

By J.p. Lawrence

STAFF WRITER

Anita Matthews shifted her burlap sack, filled with an inflated plastic bag and movie magic, from right shoulder to left. In this movie, two women carry their burdens and meet another who teaches them to plant their sadness in the ground.

The movie was part of a filmmaking workshop that came to San Antonio for the first time, taking place this week at the Elvira Cisneros Senior Community Center.

"Should I walk with the cane or without it?" said another actress, Shirley Price, 87.

"No, no, walk with the cane — it looks better," said the gregarious cameraman, John Gera, 78.

The program "I Was There" aims to help veterans make sense of traumatic service experiences through filmmaking.

"I Was There" is the brainchild of Ben Patton, grandson of Gen. George Patton of World War II fame. Ben Patton, whose father was also a general, grew up in a military family before getting into music production and filmmaking.

He opened his first workshop in 2011 at Fort Carson, Colorado. In the years since, he has done around 40 workshops, with an average of 30 veterans each. In San Antonio, older veterans were the focus of the workshop for the first time. A [WellMed](#)

Charitable Foundation grant funded the local class.

"They have an opportunity to encounter their history in whatever way they want, and without having to reveal more of themselves than they have to," Patton said.

Expressing feelings through art can boost health and immune system functioning, according to research done 30 years ago by a professor at the University of Texas at Austin. In a 1986 study, James Pennebaker asked college students to write about their most traumatic or distressing experience with as much detail as possible.

Participants in the study felt a greater sense of control and less shame when they confronted their traumas on paper rather than in person to a therapist.

Sometimes alumni from previous sessions return to help others. For James Zannetti, 42, a veteran from Fort Hood, this was his first time helping with the workshop.

The 18-year Air Force veteran said he attended a workshop a year ago and still makes films. Sometimes when he's stressed, he'll take out his camera to shoot a small scene. He said he takes what he's learned in therapy and

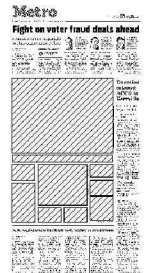
tries to apply it to his camera. Yellow is his favorite color because it's calming.

"Filmmaking has helped me get through some tough times," Zannetti said. "It's what you see, and how you show people what you see."

Working as part of a team helps veterans recall the teamwork they felt in the service, Patton said. Veterans as individual artists have control over their narratives, but they also have the assistance of like-minded team members as they work through the messy transmutation of thoughts into reality.

"We try to help them translate their experiences, a word, a phrase, into something visual," Patton said. "We're creating banks in the river, helping them articulate narratives."

The films can capture experiences of war in vivid ways. In one recent film, "Fearing the Lights Fantastic," a man speaks over archival footage of the Vietnam War, which has been superimposed over another film and chopped up into short segments. The effect is a blurred vision of the war, where mountains wobble, layers of explosions flash in and out, and bright



orange suns replace the green iridescence of bullets firing into the night.

In another film, anamorphic colored pencils, their big googly eyes bouncing, one by one sketch a rainbow. In another, a GI Joe doll marries Barbie, goes to Baghdad, then to Afghanistan, and then to Baghdad and Afghanistan again. Soon the doll is shirtless, surrounded by massive empty pill bottles on a field next to an army barracks.

"There are certain things that a combat vet or someone who suffers from sexual trauma can't speak about, but they can express it through a metaphor," Patton said.

On surveys after the workshops, Patton said, a 20 percent drop in symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder was found. The program is part-

nering for a study with the Edith Nourse Rogers Memorial Veterans Hospital in Bedford, Massachusetts, he said.

"My grandfather has somewhat of a negative association with PTSD," Patton said. "He actually struck a soldier who may have had PTSD. It's nice for me to help soldiers and veterans in another way."

Patton said he plans to have a screening in San Antonio in coming weeks of films from the workshop.

There, the community may be able to see the movie shot by Matthews, Price and Geraci. In the end of their movie, Matthews, 65, and the other actors plant their troubles in the ground, and from there, a plant grows and the bags disappear.

"The bags hold the sad

things in life you're carrying around," said Price, a Navy brat and later a Navy wife. "I'm 87, so I've got a lot of baggage."

Matthews, who served in the Vietnam War era as a Russian and Chinese linguist, said the film follows her experience as a gardener. Her troubles disappear in her garden, where olives, oranges, limes and figs grow.

"It's been like a catharsis, like a relief," Matthews said. "We understand the symbolism of what we're doing."

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Mark Reuss (from left), Jeanette Sears, Ben Patton and Mike Parkhurst edit a video at the Elvira Cisneros Senior Community Center. Patton, grandson of Gen. George Patton, does video workshops that aim to help veterans deal with traumatic experiences.



John Davenport / San Antonio Express-News

Air Force veteran John Geraci tapes during a workshop. Patton said that working as part of a team helps veterans recall the teamwork they felt in the service.



John Davenport / San Antonio Express-News

Veteran John Geraci tapes with the help of instructor Dani Tenenbaum during an I Was There film workshop at the Elvira Cisneros Senior Community Center.