

Afghanistan Veteran Sets Stage for Comedy Shows

A member of VFW Post 433 in Sayville, N.Y., starts the nonprofit *Project9Line* to help veterans through the arts

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Comedy is not a cure for the mental wounds service members receive overseas. But for Patrick Donohue, it plays an important role.

The Afghanistan War veteran said there are “no words to describe the internal happiness” he feels because of his nonprofit *Project9Line*, which hosts a comedy workshop for veterans.

Donohue said though it’s not the only activity that has helped him personally, comedy has made a difference with approaching others and speaking publicly.

“[I’m able to] share my experiences just so much better now,” Donohue said. “It’s like night and day.”

Donohue, a member of VFW Post 433 in Sayville, N.Y., started *Project9Line* in late 2013-early 2014 to help veterans. Donohue served in Kandahar, Afghanistan, with the 2nd Bde., 101st Abn. Div., as a water-treatment specialist from 2010 to 2011, and said he was diagnosed with PTSD while on active duty.

“When I returned home from overseas, I had a really, really rough time,” Donohue said. “It lasted for a few years. I finally asked for help, then went to VA for a few months and while receiving treatment, I realized some things I started to do had a profound impact on my life—writing, doing yoga, art.”

He wanted to continue those activities not only for himself, but, he said, “to help veterans like me.” And thus *Project9Line* was born.

The nonprofit helps veterans “communicate their experiences and express themselves”

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through workshops, classes and programs focused on the arts, according to *project9line.org*. *Project9Line* hosts activities ranging from yoga and fencing to mixed-martial arts and comedy.

Comedy as a Calling

Brian Cutaia, a founding *Project9Line* board member, suggested starting a comedy class. Cutaia has been a standup comedian for more than a decade, having won the Long Island Funniest Person contest in 2007 at McGuire's Comedy Club and has been featured on Sirius satellite radio.

"It was a great cause, and then it became something a lot more than just doing it for a friend," Cutaia said. "It became — 'Wow, we're really making an impact on these people's lives.'"

When Cutaia was younger, he said, he wanted to be a comic but later realized "the lifestyle isn't really all it's cracked up to be."

"It went from a dream to a hobby that I still do all the time," Cutaia said. "Maybe I was supposed to start comedy to even help these guys."

Sid Lynn, a member of VFW Post 400 in nearby Farmingville, N.Y., participated in the most recent comedy workshop.

A former VFW District 1 commander (New York, 2014-16), Lynn said those responsibilities conflicted with taking the course sooner.

"At the end of two years, I really needed to take my focus off of some other things in my life that I was going through, and I knew that *Project9Line* was there," Lynn said, "and I knew that comedy was something I've been interested in. So I just figured that the both of them would go well. Getting away from some issues I was experiencing with some very mean, bullying people and just helping me with that."

Lynn, who served as a pole lineman in Vietnam from February 1967 to May 1969 with the 40th Signal Bn., 1st Signal Bde. He said his only comedy experience prior to the workshop was with family and friends.

"I expected to have 10 weeks of a good time, culminating in a show," Lynn said. "I was looking for a nice time to intermingle with other veterans and just put myself in a different venue than I'd been in for the last few years."

Cutaia said the experience has been good for him, too. He said he has developed beneficial relationships with veterans who have participated in the workshop.

“I’ll teach them how to say a few jokes,” Cutaia said. “They’ve taught me 10 times more than I could have ever taught them.”

But at first, Cutaia said, he was worried about bringing comedy to *Project9Line* because being on stage — and possibly not getting a good reaction — can be “very disheartening.”

“Laughter, they say, is the best medicine, so when you’re able to give people the opportunity to spread medicine, that’s even better than the laughter,” Cutaia said. “It’s something unique.”

The workshop lasts eight weeks, but Cutaia said “you can’t really teach comedy.”

“People are either funny or they’re not,” Cutaia said. “It’s showing them how to direct their funniness and how to make something they think is funny, make them develop it into a laugh.”

‘It’s you and the mic’

Seven people graduated from the first eight-week class in 2015, including Donohue. More than 30 veterans have taken the workshop since, according to Donohue, and the final shows at the conclusion of each course have been held at area VFW Posts.

Veterans of “every branch [and] every combat era” form the classes, according to Donohue, who participated because he likes to “lead from the front.”

“It was very, very nerve-wracking at first,” Donohue said. “It’s the most-scary thing in the world to just be on a stage. It’s you and the mic.”

The class itself is built around creating one, five-minute comedy set for each participant. The first few weeks, according to Donohue, are spent “learning what makes a joke” and how to take life experiences and turn them into “funny” material.

“Then we begin to do those jokes in front of each other and critique each other,” Donohue said.

Cutaia explained that he wants veterans to talk on stage as a first step and develop the confidence that’s necessary in comedy. He also teaches “basic rules of comedy,” such as not wearing a shirt with writing on it and putting the mic stand at the back of the stage once removing the mic itself.

“Comedy is about your facial features,” Cutaia said. “How you act, how you present the joke.”

They also focus on the writing style and how to deliver jokes.

“There are different types of humor,” Cutaia said, “and then little things, too, like you have to put the funny word at the end of the sentence.”

Each class “graduates” with a comedy show held at a local VFW Post. The first show was held at Post 433.

John Rago, commander of VFW Post 400, participated in the January 2015 comedy workshop. He is a Vietnam-era veteran who served from 1970-72 in the Navy as a sonar tech 3rd class patrolling on the *USS Francis Scott Key* near Spain.

Prior to *Project9Line*, the biggest audience Rago ever had was “around the kitchen table.” His bit includes his time in the Navy, but also his 43-year marriage.

“I rag on my wife a lot,” he quipped.

But for Rago, performing in front of a room full of people was “unique.”

“The nerves start to get to you after a while, especially the night of a show,” he said. “My biggest fear was forgetting my act and just drawing a blank. That was my worst fear, but again, another thing you have to get over.”

Rago said he does not have PTSD, but he saw the comedy workshop “help other guys who do suffer,” noting, however, that it’s “not a cure.”

“It helps them deal with the situation and they become more open about it and their whole demeanor changes,” Rago said.

For Lynn, comedy helped take his mind off of his problems. He used “pretty current personal experiences” for his routine, which did not include religion, politics or anything “dirty.”

“That’s where I wanted to be, and that’s what I did,” Lynn said. “Just the process, it was a lot of fun. There were another 10-12 people in the group, and I knew one other fella in the group and you [were] kind of brought together. It was really a wonderful experience.”

Rago, who turned 67 in August, said the class of veterans formed a bond and supported each other.

“It gives me a chance to interact with the younger guys... [and it] might make them realize

they can get through this,” Rago said.

‘More Than Words Could Ever Describe’

Donohue said the “most important” thing he does on a daily basis is spread awareness about *Project9Line* and its causes.

“What I’ve found is that comedy is one of the best ways,” Donohue said.

Cutaia said *Project9Line* is “different than any other organization” because it’s not run by doctors or therapists.

“What I think comedy does for these veterans is just something different,” Cutaia said. “We’re not here to talk to you, to find out what’s the root of things going on with you.”

Rather, the comedy workshops help veterans take their minds off of issues in their lives, according to Cutaia.

“For some people, it has developed into an entire hobby or passion or a dream,” Cutaia said. “It’s something that will distract. It’s something new to bring to people that will give them something to look forward to and something to give themselves progression with.”

Lynn said in creating *Project9Line*, Donohue has “helped countless veterans.”

“He’s a wonderful young man,” Lynn said, “and he’s got a lot going for him and he’s helped a lot of people.”

Donohue said he gets more satisfaction from his involvement with *Project9Line* than anything else.

“It’s been a lot of hard work and ups and downs, but my life today is great,” Donohue said. “And I have a lot to credit to the [creative] outlets that I choose to participate in. But also, building *Project9Line* and helping others has given me more than words could ever describe.”

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