

‘Medicine for the Soul’

A professional choreographer introduced a group of veterans to the world of dance and said the project changed HIS life

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A Los Angeles-based dance company spent two weeks earlier this year working with veterans in Manhattan, Kan., in what one participant called “medicine for the soul.”

DIABOLO, created by Jacques Heim, received a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to conduct a two-week residency at Kansas State University in Manhattan. Heim started the Veterans Project three years ago as part of DIABOLO’s community outreach efforts.

Initially, Heim said, he was nervous about working with veterans because he did not know much about their community. But after spending time with his first group of former service members, treating them the same way he treats his dancers, they “really” connected.

“It became this beautiful relationship working with them,” Heim said. “And it’s really in that moment that I realized, ‘Wow, this is the reason why I have a dance company.’”

Antonio Pipkin, one of the four veterans in the DIABOLO-produced workshop at K-State, served in Afghanistan from 2004-05 with the 10th Mountain Division and in Iraq from 2007-08 with the 82nd Airborne Div., as a geospatial engineer. He performed in March alongside soldiers from Fort Riley’s Warrior Transition Battalion, one of whom Pipkin connected with because they both are from Washington, D.C.

“I could see in him the benefits of being with DIABOLO, mostly on the psychological side,” Pipkin said. “You get that sense of being with the family again and camaraderie and having people depend on you.

“And we were so involved for that two weeks, we didn’t have time to worry about the things that bothered us psychologically. So it was medicine for the soul.”

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Art DeGroat, executive director of the Office of Military and Veterans Affairs and the Military and Veterans Affairs Innovation Center at K-State, began working with DIAVOLO about two-and-a-half years ago after learning of its Veterans Project.

“They realized that a public performance was not only therapeutic for veterans performing it, but also a major service for the public to see these veterans as strong and artistic [people],” said DeGroat, who served in Saudi Arabia with the Army during the 1991 Persian Gulf War from 1990-91 as an armor officer with A Co., 2nd Bn., 67th Armor Bn., 3rd Bde., 3rd Armored Div. Heim said part of his goal with the workshop is to restore physical, mental and emotional aspects of the veterans, and he does that through “intense” movements.

“I want to give them tools hopefully they can apply in their everyday life so they don’t abandon themselves,” Heim said.

‘Save Our Souls’

Four veterans and four civilians performed a 23-minute program, “SOS (Save Our Souls, Signs of Survival, Strength of Soldiers),” which was based off of original transcripts from U.S. soldiers who participated in World War I battles. DeGroat served as the narrator for the performance and helped research the “narrative content” that was integrated into the script.

“I had a deep stake in it artistically, and that was rare,” said DeGroat, a life member of VFW’s Department of Kansas. “Because I’ve done so much work in support of combat vets [and] readjustment, [but I] never really immersed myself as a readjusting combat veteran. I kind of felt first-hand the power of art-making and artistic expression.”

Pipkin, who studied photography at K-State, initially intended to photograph the workshop and final performance. But as he talked with DeGroat and Heim about the residency, conversation led to his actual involvement in the performance itself. Pipkin said he has had his own struggles with post-traumatic stress and depression, but never pictured himself in front of an audience.

Regardless, he said he couldn’t turn down the opportunity to work with a “prestigious dance group” like DIAVOLO.

“It was very intensive, and physically demanding, but rewarding at the same time,” Pipkin said.

The Army vet said his main goal for his performance was to “nail everything” he had learned during the residency. But most important was the opportunity to show his daughter a different side of himself.

“After it was all over, my feeling of accomplishment was just through the roof,” Pipkin said. “She enjoyed it. The audience reaction on both nights was unbelievable. There were

standing ovations both nights.” Performance has ‘Restorative Power’ DIAVOLO, according to Heim, helps veterans restore parts of themselves that they might have lost sight of.

“We’re really taking veterans, men and women, and putting them into an intense movement workshop where I push them because I believe in them more than they actually believe in themselves,” Heim said.

The transition of leaving the service and “people who were your tribe” makes it “increasingly” more difficult for the current generation of veterans to express themselves in relation to their war experiences, according to DeGroat.

Performance art, he said, allows veterans to communicate feelings that are not always easy to express through words.

“Here’s a way to move with their bodies,” DeGroat said. “It’s kind of like a derivative of, ‘A picture’s worth a thousand words.’ Well, a movement says 2,000 words.”

The workshop, according to Heim, also creates a bridge between veterans and civilians.

“I really believe that civilians, including me on day one, we don’t know what those amazing human beings are about, what are they made of,” Heim said.

And as much as Heim aims to help veterans, he said the vets also teach “amazing” lessons to civilians.

“There’s a gigantic eye opener on what those men and women went through and what they can learn in their everyday life as civilians,” Heim said.

Heim added his time at K-State was a “powerful” experience and made him realize that his work with veterans has only just begun.

“This work with veterans has changed my life, has changed the life of my dance company and it’s this ongoing work that I’m going to do until the end of my dance company or the end of my own life,” Heim said.

DIAVOLO partnered with the Office of Military and Veterans Affairs, scholars from the school of leadership studies, the K-State theater, music and dance program and McCain Auditorium during the March residency.

For more information about DIAVOLO’s Veterans Project and where it will be next, visit DIAVOLO.org/the-veterans-project.

This article is featured in the 2019 August issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Kari Williams](#), associate editor for VFW magazine.