

# Healing Veterans Through the Arts

## A VFW member in Texas has turned his passion for art and helping his fellow veterans into a successful month-long festival

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Glenn Towery has a smile in his eyes that is infectious. The Vietnam War veteran has a light that shines from within. Without his saying a word, Towery seems genuinely pleased to make your acquaintance.

It is his larger-than-life presence that has made the Austin Veteran Art Festival, or AVAFEST, the success that it is. From his home in Round Rock, Texas, Towery started AVAFEST in 2018 with the idea of using the arts to heal veterans. This year's event is Oct. 12-Nov. 12 at various locations around Austin and surrounding communities.

"I wanted to promote art as a healing modality," said Towery, a member of VFW Post 856 in Austin. "It really caught on like wildfire. I got a lot of credit for this, but the volunteers made this event happen. They hung in there despite me not knowing what I was doing. I learned as I went. The people were determined to create this festival. They stood up and made it happen."

In 2020, the festival was canceled due to COVID-19, but it returned in 2021, though largely virtual.

Diagnosed with PTSD years ago, Towery can personally attest to the healing power of art in any form. However, like many of life's journeys, the road to this realization and later to Austin was not an easy one.

### **'I WAS GANG RESISTANT'**

Growing up in South Central Los Angeles in the 1960s, Towery was surrounded by gang violence. He saw friends get badly beaten.

"You didn't even have to be looking for trouble, but it would find you," he said. "I was gang resistant and didn't want to get into it."

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Towery recalled he and his younger brother, Stonewall, watching “West Side Story” at a local theater. The idea that gangs would sing and dance was “outrageously confusing” to the pair.

“I think at one juncture, we knew every song in the motion picture and many of the dance moves, too,” Towery said. “We were so affected by it, that both of us are performers to this day.”

Towery began noticing commercials for joining the Navy to see the world. With that notion in mind — and what he perceived a positive change in environment — he joined the Navy in 1970 when he was 18.

The Navy recruiter was unfazed that Towery lacked a high school diploma.

“The recruiter was told, ‘If the body is warm, ship it,’” Towery recalled. “After all, I was joining at the height of the Vietnam War.”

At boot camp, Towery was in charge of marching his company. After graduation and training, Towery was assigned to the USS Rupertus (DD-851).

What he was met with aboard the Rupertus was vastly different than his boot camp experiences, he said.

“At boot camp, everyone pulled together and everyone was a team,” Towery said. “On the ship, I encountered indifference. Those on the bridge and the enlisted were all white except for me, and it caused me great, great pain. They felt like I was an intruder. They couldn’t see that I was taking pressure from them and in my own quarters from black sailors who thought I was better than them.”

Off the coast of Vietnam in 1971, the ship tried to draw fire from the enemy on the ground. Though not trained in ordnance, Towery loaded ammunition into the ship’s six-inch guns.

From the powder on the shells, he became “gravely ill” and had to be medevacked to Subic Bay Naval Hospital in the Philippines. He had multiple white phosphorous burns. He was later discharged from the Navy.

His years following the Navy were anything but pleasant. Homelessness, severe bouts of anxiety brought on by PTSD and attempted suicide sent Towery on a downward spiral.

Then his son, Keith, was born. Towery said his son’s birth saved his life.

“I always wanted him to be in my life and have a sense of pride when he saw me,” Towery said. “He really saved me by just having him. He kept me from going totally under. I kept

him in my mind and knew that he was going to need me.”

Towery ended up with his son living with him from an early age. He said he recognized that his son was a confused little boy who needed his father’s attention.

Keith became a Marine before earning both undergraduate and graduate degrees from American University. Today, he works for the Department of Justice Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

“I’m very proud of my son,” Towery said. “He is much smarter than me.”

With a love of film and theater, Towery enrolled at Columbia College Hollywood in California, where he graduated magna cum laude in 1997 as the school’s first black valedictorian. He earned a bachelor’s degree in cinema with a minor in television broadcast production.

His passion for the arts led him to his wife and fellow artist, Juanita, and eventually to Texas, where the Veterans Suicide Prevention Channel was born.

#### **‘AN EXPLOSION OF CREATIVITY’**

A professional artist for more than 35 years, Juanita was from a large family in Texas. In 2013, the Towerys left southern California for Austin.

Towery said one of the first things he did when he arrived in Texas was to stop in the local VFW Post. The first person he met was then-Department of Texas Assistant Adjutant Dan West (now VFW Adjutant General).

In that first meeting, Towery told West his idea for creating a channel that veterans could watch 24 hours a day.

“I wanted a place veterans could go without having to say who they are,” Towery said. “I wanted to give them a place they could get information, referrals and therapy.”

West introduced Towery to past Department of Texas Commander John Spahr, who encouraged Towery to start a 501(c)3. In 2015, the Veterans Suicide Prevention (VSP) Channel (<https://www.vspchannel.vet>) came to be. In just nine months, it had 1 million views.

At the VSP Channel, veterans and their family members also can find online therapies such as meditation.

Out of the VSP Channel sprung AVAFEST. Towery was searching for a way to use the arts

and community to promote mental wellness in veterans.

“AVAFEST gives veterans a platform to showcase and practice their art and encourage them to enjoy the healing elements inherent in practicing the arts,” Towery said.

Towery said this year’s AVAFEST will feature the Tom Lea American Combat Veteran Exhibit at the Old Bakery and Emporium Gallery in downtown Austin, just steps from the state capitol building.

Thomas C. Lea III was a muralist, illustrator, artist, WWII war correspondent, novelist and historian.

Ten combat veterans will have their art selected to be exhibited along with Lea’s works. Herlinda Zamora, the culture and arts program manager with Austin’s Museum and Cultural Programs Division, is curating the exhibit.

“It’s quite an honor to collaborate with Glenn,” she said. “It’s a joy to brainstorm together. It’s like an explosion of creativity. We have a great connection. Glenn is always concerned about making sure everyone is taken care of. He does not give up.”

Zamora said she hopes this exhibit, which runs from Oct. 22-Dec. 3, brings awareness to the life and work of Lea.

“We hope to introduce his work to those who are not familiar with his legacy,” Zamora said. “Also, we want to educate our audiences about PTSD and how art has healed so many veterans after coming back from combat. I expect this to be an emotional and inspirational exhibition.”

Billy Ray Stubblefield serves as the liaison between the Tom Lea Institute in El Paso and the VSP Channel, for which he serves on the board of directors.

The presiding judge of the Third Administrative Judicial Region in Texas, Stubblefield first met Towery at a Rotary Club meeting.

“I immediately felt we would become friends, and we did,” Stubblefield said. “I have a deep regard for all veterans, and I had become aware of the shocking suicide rate among our vets.”

In addition to arranging a string quartet from the Central Texas Philharmonic to provide music for the opening day Tom Lea exhibit, Stubblefield collaborated to have digitized versions of Lea’s work printed on canvas for the exhibit.

“Glenn says I am an executive producer,” Stubblefield said. “I don’t know enough to argue

with him. The title sounds more important than I am.”

### **‘CREATIVITY IS A COPING SKILL’**

AVAFEST recognizes art in many forms, including music, dance, poetry, drama, comedy and even car restoration.

Bruce Hodge, a member of VFW Post 3377 in Austin, travels to different car shows and interviews people who work on cars for the VSP Channel. Through these interviews, he sees the healing that takes place in working on a car.

“I have found it is very therapeutic,” said Hodge, who served in the Army for 15 years. “I also have found that my outlet for PTSD is working with others to overcome PTSD.”

Hodge said the AVAFEST Veterans Car Show will be on Oct. 16 in Round Rock at the Jester Annex.

A veteran of Operation Desert Shield and Operation Desert Storm, Hodge said that in addition to an art and car show, there will be food trucks, representatives of veterans service organizations and vendors.

Army veteran Elisabeth Joy is the dance director for AVAFEST. A Chinook pilot with the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), Elisabeth Joy served in both Afghanistan and Iraq.

She later flew Black Hawk helicopters and served as the aero-medical evacuation commander with the Texas Army National Guard.

Elisabeth Joy has personally found dancing to be a healing art. Fire spinning, which resembles twirling large, flaming batons, also helps her to combat PTSD.

In addition to dance workshops, there will be multiple dance performances. Exit 12 Dance Company from New York City will be in town to perform.

Founded by Iraq War vet Roman Baca, Exit 12 is “devoted to those who have been touched by conflict by expressing their stories.”

Marine-turned-comic Al Gonzalez is the AVAFEST director of comedy. He is charged with bringing humor to the festival.

“I look for people who are funny and also have a military connection,” Gonzalez said. “Comedy can be so healing for those doing it.”

Gonzalez, whose dad was a Vietnam veteran with PTSD, said he brought a “sense of levity” to his father’s life through his sense of humor.

Having performed on numerous television networks, Gonzalez has brought a virtual reality element to AVAFEST's comedy performances this year.

"Through virtual reality, you can literally see comedy shows from around the world," Gonzalez said. "It is like you are actually there."

Peter Buotte, who retired from the Army after 28 years, including five overseas combat deployments, is the AVAFEST director of military art.

He is the art therapist at the Intrepid Spirit Traumatic Brain Injury Center at Ft. Hood, Texas, and has honed his own artistic talent at such places as the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris.

"For so many, creativity is a coping skill," Buotte said. "Each sketchbook saved me in the war zone."

Buotte is just one of a team of creatives working with Towery to make this year's AVAFEST the biggest to date.

### **CREATING 'POSITIVE EMOTIONS'**

Other veterans, such as retired Army Master Sgt. Tracey L.B. Greene, for instance, work on AVAFEST in a variety of capacities. Greene also is the VSP Channel vice chair.

Wounded in Afghanistan in 2016 in an IED attack that killed 11 soldiers and one civilian, Greene said she records, hosts, sings and does poetry when needed. "We help veterans create art that puts colors and objects to their pain, which creates positive emotions that leads to an overall euphoria," said Greene, a member of VFW Post 12209 on Fort Hood, the only VFW Post on a military installation.

"On the VSP Channel, most veterans will find something that will show ways to alter their minds, taking them from their danger zone into a state of mind that guides them to a call center for assistance instead of ending their lives."

Greene was recently elected as the first female commander of the Department of Texas Military Order of the Purple Heart.

Air Force veteran Vecepia Robinson serves as the director of poetry and spoken word for AVAFEST and also is on the VSP Channel board of directors.

In this role, she searches for talented veterans, active-duty service members and their families.

"Writing poetry or expressing oneself via written or spoken word supplies comfort from

chaos and inspiration in a time of need,” said Robinson, a writer and poet. “In my experience working with many veterans and their loved ones, poetry has been that healing element needed when sharing their truth.”

Robinson, who was named “Ultimate Survivor” in 2005 on the TV reality show “Survivor,” said she hopes to have at least 15 poets this year.

### **FESTIVAL IS ‘MUCH NEEDED’**

Towery said AVAFEST could not work without the support of the city of Austin and communities such as Round Rock. Additionally, through the support of Veterans United Home Loans in Austin, AVAFEST will again have its Veterans Arts and Wellness Channel available on which it will air performances and exhibits.

Veterans United Home Loans Branch Manager Chad Bowman [license number NMLS 191475] is a Marine veteran who said he is happy to support AVAFEST again this year.

“Every member of our team gives at least 1 percent of their income to our Veterans United Foundation,” Bowman said. “That has allowed us to donate quite a bit of money to local causes helping our veteran community.”

Another AVAFEST advocate, Peter Salazar Jr., serves as vice chair of the Commission of Veterans Affairs for the city of Austin.

“This festival was much needed,” said Salazar, who could not join the military due to his cerebral palsy. “It has been truly amazing to watch this grow each year.”

Salazar’s grandfather, a Vietnam War veteran, told him if he could not personally serve in the military, to find a new way to serve. With that in mind, Salazar has spent his life doing just that. He is a founding member of U.S. Disabled Veterans Abroad and serves on the VSP Channel board.

“War permanently affects those who have seen it,” Salazar said. “It means a lot to me to see veterans express themselves in any capacity they can. And that is what this festival does for them.”

Towery noted that while the festival began in Austin, it has expanded to Killeen, Round Rock, Temple and Belton, Texas. He said he is remaining optimistic that AVAFEST is a pivotal event that spreads far and wide across the United States.

“I want the main festival to always be rooted in Austin, known as Festival City,” Towery said. “But I do hope the festival could be embraced by local towns and cities throughout the nation for 30 days. That way, veterans both nationally and locally could be served.”

For now, Towery said no matter where you live, you can tune in to the 2022 festival on the Roku channel across the nation and online at <https://www.veteransartsandwellnessnetwork.org/watch-live>.

“I am not the best manager of this event, but I am it, for now,” Towery said. “Hopefully one day we can get a person who really knows what they are doing and it will take off, engulf the nation and live forever.”

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