

Festival Gives Wounded Warriors Therapeutic Outlet

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Creative Arts Festival Gives Wounded Warriors Therapeutic Outlet

Retired Army Sgt. Maj. Michael Slatton, a veteran of operations Iraq Freedom, Enduring Freedom and Desert Storm participating in the National Veterans Creative Arts Festival, said music has helped him in his battle with post-traumatic stress disorder and bipolar disorder. Department of Veterans Affairs photo by Gene Davies

WASHINGTON, Oct. 22, 2008 – Veterans of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan are among more than 120 disabled veterans from across the country attending the National Veterans Creative Arts Festival this week in Riverside, Calif.

The week-long festival kicked off yesterday, bringing together medal winners in national creative writing, music, dance, drama or visual arts competitions. Each participant edged out more than 3,000 competitors to earn spots at the national festival, Department of Veterans Affairs officials said.

Retired Army Sgt. Maj. Michael Slatton, a veteran of operations Iraq Freedom, Enduring Freedom and Desert Storm; and retired Air Force Lt. Col. Dennis Linn, a veteran of Operation Enduring Freedom, are among the participants.

Slatton retired in 2005 at Fort Gordon, Ga., and suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder and bipolar disorder. He and his VA group, The Heavenly Harmonizers, sang their way to this year's National Veterans Creative Arts Festival -- Slatton's fourth -- by winning a gold medal during a preliminary competition in Houston with their gospel song, "Jesus, You Are the Center of My Joy."

Linn retired in 2004 and suffers from cardiovascular disease. A former military artist who once taught art at the Air Force Academy, he painted his way to the VA national festival with gold medals for three paintings in three different media: pastel, oil and watercolor.

Veterans Affairs Secretary James B. Peake called the National Veterans Creative Arts Festival an



extension of VA's rehabilitative care.

"Creative expression is an important component of healthy living," Peake said. "This annual festival shows that real healing goes well beyond our patients' physical needs. Creative arts therapy has a key role at VA in rehabilitation and recovery."

Slatton was introduced to the benefits of music therapy while undergoing treatment at the VA hospital near his Chicago home. He'd been singing in church since he was young and had his own music group for years, but now sings mostly with groups he's met through the VA.

"It's true what they say: Music really does soothe the savage beast," he said. "It gives me an outlet and a way to express myself in ways other than combat."

Slatton called the festival a great opportunity for veterans to share their love of the arts along with each other's company.

"I love the fellowship of the other veterans. I'm hooked on it," he said. "There's no competition here, because to get here, you've already won. So the atmosphere here is all about camaraderie. It's a real pleasure to be here with all these veterans."

Linn, now a professional artist in Rapid City, S.D., called art an outlet that helps him transcend his physical limitations. "Art has always been therapeutic for me," he said. "It cultivates your imagination and creativity and serves as an avenue for self-expression."

Linn called the festival a valuable experience for veterans that takes their minds off the physical or mental challenges they face. "It helps take away the stress," he said. "This is a great program for veterans, and I hope more get involved."

Annie Tuttle, the festival's host site coordinator, said a full schedule of rehearsals, workshops, art showings and other activities this week is showcasing the veterans' talents as well as the benefits of the visual and performing arts as therapy.

A grand-finale stage and art show later this week is expected to be a program highlight. The veterans will exhibit their artwork or perform musical, dance, dramatic or original writing selections in a gala variety show.

The National Veterans Creative Arts Festival is sponsored by the VA, Help Hospitalized Veterans and the American Legion Auxiliary, and is hosted by the VA's Loma Linda Healthcare System.