

Veterans Voices Writing Project

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Writing as Therapy

Recreational Therapy for Veterans Promotes Creative Expression as a Healing Process by Stuart Sidell, MS,CAS,CTRS VAMC-Bay Pines, FL

“It has been satisfying being able to express my emotions through poetry,” says Howard Kirkman, resident of the Nursing Home Care unit at the Bay Pines V.A. Medical Center since 1956. Mr. Kirkman, 81, has had several poems, as well as artwork, published in *Veterans’ Voices*, a publication dedicated to acknowledging the thoughts and feelings of veterans and building self-esteem through creative expression. Mr. Kirkman is permanently disabled from a diving accident that left him with level C-5 quadriplegia. Despite the physical limitations caused by his spinal cord injury, Howard clearly demonstrates the power of a creative mind set on expressing itself. Howard often uses the written word to connect, and explains how by saying, “I’ve enjoyed writing poems to my wife. It helps me to say things on paper I would be self-conscious about saying to her personally.”

As a certified therapeutic recreation specialist, I have worked with Howard since 1992, and I have seen the positive effects, both mental and physical, of his artful and creative expressions in writing poetry as well as in his painting.

Clinical studies have demonstrated positive impact of creative expression on the mood of patients, families and the health professionals who care for them. The studies show that exposure to the arts can lead to stress relief, improved communication and positive effects on physical measures such as blood pressure and heart rate. The arts can provide a creative diversion from the reality of illness, while identifying a patient’s previously unexpressed emotional and spiritual needs. This can result in stress reduction and faster healing — and in some cases, a more peaceful death.

“My painting is an expression of what I believe,” stated a 49 year-old VA Medical Center resident who was dying of cancer. The veteran had painstakingly painted a picture, in great detail, of what he believes happens when you die. “As long as you believe, you’re there.” His painting reflected his belief that all people who claim God as the supreme being in their lives would be greeted in heaven by an angel. The painting became a visual reminder of hope for him as his impending death grew near. On a recent visit to our facility, a renowned speaker noted this resident’s creative expression of his beliefs and stated, “this patient’s expression through his painting was the ultimate in self-actualization.”

Through their creations and self-expressions, the lives of our veterans are enhanced and their value affirmed. I think Howard Kirkman said it best, when he reported, “The best part of my life was when I was painting.” When we encourage and provide the means for self-expression, such as publication in *Veterans’ Voices*, we provide a very powerful acknowledgement to the lives of our nation’s heroes — those men and women who served our country in the Armed Forces.