

National Veterans Creative Arts Festival.

In Kalamazoo, Michigan from 28 October through 3 November, the Battle Creek VA Medical Center and the American Legion Auxiliary will host 150 Veterans from across the nation for the National Veterans Creative Arts Festival. Featured at the Festival will be select winners from a year-long, national fine arts talent competitions in which over 3,500 Veterans participated. The weeklong festival will culminate with an art and writing exhibition, and stage show performance to encourage artistic expression and help Veterans dealing with Post-traumatic Stress Disorder and other mental health issues.

“The National Veterans Creative Arts Festival recognizes the top artistic achievements of Veterans and demonstrates to communities the therapeutic benefits of the arts in the lives of our nation’s Veterans,” said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. “For many of these Veterans, creative expression has served as an avenue toward recovery and this week’s event continues that rehabilitation journey.” Veterans representing 130 VA medical centers have competed in local competitions in art, music, dance, drama and writing categories and earned first place recognition for their talent. Veterans will participate in workshops, rehearsals and artistic interaction sessions prior to the grand finale performance. Veterans’ artwork will be displayed at an art and writing exhibition gallery-style meet and greet on 3 November.

The Creative Arts Festival was started in 1981 as part of the observance of the International Year of Disabled Persons. The Festival has grown since then and now has five major components; art, music, dance, drama and creative writing.

As I remember from my Counseling classes of many years ago, there are many ways to help people with mental health issues. Some of the ones I learned were individual counseling, group therapy, medication, recreational therapy and what was known as complementary therapy such as yoga and meditation. Over the years, we learned that other methods also work well. Veterans have some very unique mental health issues.. Although Veterans have suffered from mental health issues as a result of combat for years, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) was officially recognized following research on returning Vietnam War Veterans. Trumatic Brain Injury (TBI) is a more recent and is a result of combat explosions. For Veterans there has been success in support groups, hunting and fishing trips, service animals and expression in the Arts.

During my years as GI Bill Counselor at MSUM, I remember two instances of Veterans with Art majors. In both cases, the Veteran was enrolled in a non-arts major, changed majors and was able to use visual art as an expression and release from his PTSD. Both Veterans were married but with no children. One of the Veterans was able to move on with his life, graduated and became successful. The other Veteran, unfortunately did not find the released he needed. He was successful for a short time, but then he opened his Vietnam box and all of the terrible memories returned. He dropped out of college, refused VA treatment and dropped out of sight. Veterans, as others with mental health issues, react to treatment differently and there is no single solution.