

SongwritingWith:Soldiers

Reflections on Strengths



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**REFLECTIONS ON STRENGTHS**



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# Reflections On Strengths

“The greatest good you can do for another is not just share your riches, but to reveal to him his own.”  
– Benjamin Disraeli



## The Power Of Strengths

Over the past three years, our Reflections books have highlighted each component of our mission statement - *to transform lives by using collaborative songwriting to expand **creativity, connections, and strengths.***

While creativity and connections through collaborative songwriting and simple acts like a walk in nature, listening to each other and sharing a meal may be an obvious part of what we do, strengths are what really make the entire program so beautifully effective.

Throughout each retreat weekend there is a strong intention to focus on what makes us flourish and for us to all find and nurture our strengths.

Every retreat helps the participants reveal and bring awareness to not only their own strengths but the many strengths of each person in the group. Cultivating an awareness of our strengths can be a bit of hard work. Strength is more than the muscles we use to lift, and bigger than will power to struggle through.

Our strengths are our drivers. Some examples they find are bravery, persistence, hope and teamwork. But others can be more subtle like self-control, a love of learning, honesty, kindness, and curiosity.

We shine when using our strengths. We shine when sharing our strengths. Our strengths can lift each other up, together creating a greater community. When we use them we are, each of us, at our most authentic.

We all benefit when everyone shares their strengths. As part of our community, you bring your greatest strengths to support the mission of SongwritingWith:Soldiers. You are the pillars that hold us up! Without you SongwritingWith:Soldiers could never have the impact that you see in this book.

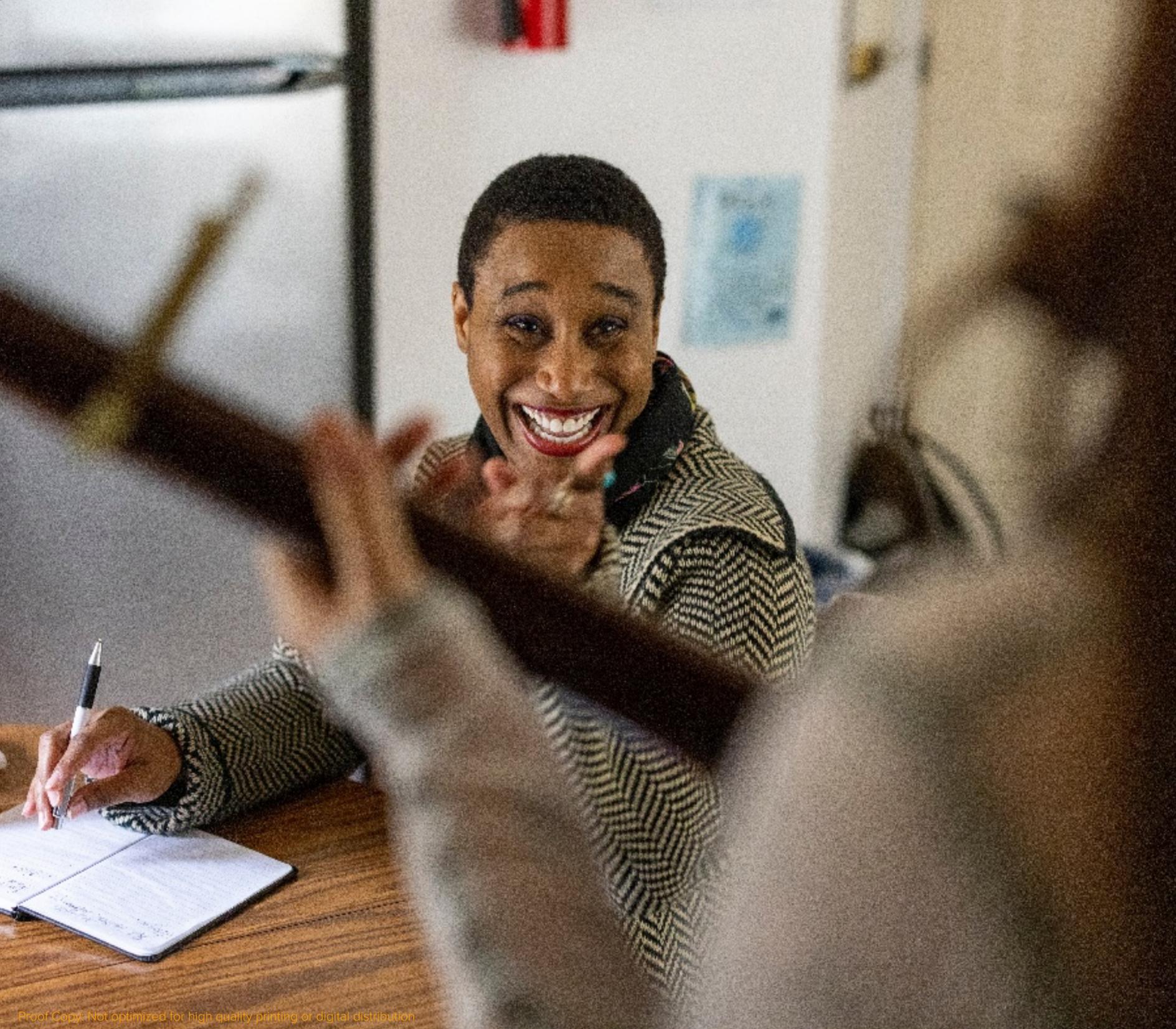
Terry Radigan with James House, Georgia Middleman, and Mark Nesler leading the group write. Evins Mill, TN, June 2022  
Photo: Ed Rode



# Building Strengths

Selected Stories From Our Community

Loveland, CO October 2021  
Photo: Rick Loomis



## Back To The Future

Celebrating 10 years of serving veterans had to be a momentous occasion! So, in October 2022, SongwritingWith:Soldiers headed back to the site that started it all – Cedarbrake Retreat Center in Belton, TX. Celebrating 10 years of service around the country, with our roots in Texas, was powerful.

It was a beautiful time of sharing, creativity and of course, songwriting! Our talented writers were Bonnie Bishop, Marshall Altman and Mark Nesler, led by SW:S Music Director Jay Clementi. Jay was at the very first retreat before SongwritingWith:Soldiers even had a name. Having Jay serve the 10th anniversary retreat as lead songwriter in Belton was a beautiful confirmation of the sustainability of our mission.

One of Jay's most prominent strengths is that of 'love.' He pours his heart into every retreat, song, recording and, frankly, everything he does! He shares that when working with the songwriters, *"We always say, 'Lead with love, and it always ends up being something beautiful.' We are lucky to be able to tell these stories."*

We feel fortunate and proud to have helped tell more than 1,000 stories through song and as we reflect on the past decade, we know that there is so much more yet to come!

As the group in Texas came together, representing many different branches of the military with many varied experiences and stories, they worked together to find their strengths and realized that just like SW:S on its 10th Anniversary, they were "feeling revived!"

Shawn Tillman, Belton, TX, October 2022  
Photo: Lauren Petracca

## Feeling Alive

Angela Caruso-Yahne / Rebecca Fenton / Trevor Fenton / Don Krimmer / Dale Mofield / Jahanna Seeling /  
Donna Smith / Shawn Tillman / Marshall Altman / Bonnie Bishop / Jay Clementi / Mark Nesler

I'm feeling nervous but I'm here  
Doing 90 running from the fear  
Stepping on that stage eyes wide open  
I'm not alone I'm feeling hope and

I'm feeling revived  
I'm feeling alive  
We got that energy  
Picking up that harmony  
Feeling revived  
Taking I-35  
To find my tribe we all need a better life  
Yeah survived  
I'm feeling alive

We're all here living loud  
I've made mistakes but I'm standing proud  
Never thought I'd live to this age  
I made my choice I'm gonna turn the page

I'm feeling revived  
I'm feeling alive  
We got that energy  
Picking up that harmony  
Feeling revived  
Taking I-35  
To find my tribe we all need a better life  
Yeah survived  
I'm feeling alive

Brothers and sisters  
Welcome home  
Brothers and sisters  
You've been gone too long  
You've been gone too long

Now we're feeling revived  
Feeling Alive  
We got that energy  
Picking up that harmony  
Feeling revived  
Taking I-35  
To find my tribe we all need a better life  
Yeah I survived  
I'm feeling alive  
I'm feeling alive  
I'm feeling alive





## Gaining Strength From Our Peers

At retreats, past participants join the team as peer support to welcome new SW:S participants to their first retreat and after, into our community. These peers let them know that they were once there as a first-time participant as well and they understand.

Going back is an opportunity for the peer mentors to share so many of their strengths. Many shine with hope and kindness. One example is A.J. Merrifield who freely shares his strengths of perspective and teamwork.

A.J. participated in the second SW:S retreat in the spring of 2013. At that retreat, he was able to sit down with Gary Nicholson to turn his story about serving on funeral detail into a healing song that not only changed A.J., but also continues to be shared regularly for those going through similar duties.

After that first retreat, he quickly came back as peer support and he has served at multiple retreats since then. A.J. shared, *“Before I got involved with SongwritingWith:Soldiers, I think like a lot of veterans, there was a lot of stuff that I really hadn't found a way to deal with. There were a lot of things that I personally thought I was the only one who was feeling. And what I found in working with SongwritingWith:Soldiers and being a participant and then later on as a mentor, I found that these were things that I wasn't the only one feeling.”*

*“The interesting thing is, coming back into the SongwritingWith:Soldiers program as a mentor in some ways actually helped me to grow even more than my initial participation did. Because like they say ‘one of the best ways to learn something is to find a way to teach it.’ I think one of the best ways to learn how to process and deal with the things we've been through and to communicate the things we've been through is to help others to communicate and really kind of engage with those things as well. It was an amazing growth opportunity for me, and to see that growth and that change in others, was a life-changing experience.”*

Through the role of peer support we provide past participants with the beauty of watching other veterans find and expand their strengths, while also giving them the opportunity to take another valuable step in their own ongoing journey.

A.J. Merrifield with co-founder Mary Judd, Belton, TX, April 2013  
Photo: Stacy Pearsall

## Funeral Detail

A.J. Merrifield / Gary Nicholson

I'm the one who hands the flag to the family  
One last reminder of everything they've lost  
We all pledge allegiance to  
The red, white, and blue  
And honor the ones that paid the cost

I can't let a tear reveal  
The sadness that I feel  
I just say the words I know are not enough  
We just hear the taps play  
Salute and walk away  
And they're gone without the one they love

I'm the one who hands the flag to the family  
A symbol of the sacrifice they've seen  
I take away the hope they've held on to  
That maybe it's all a bad dream  
Some bring it home and place it on the mantle  
Some just want to hide it away  
I just hide how I feel and make that same speech  
Knowing there's nothing I can say

I'm the one that hands the flag to the family  
Their eyes will haunt me always  
I'm just a soldier on a funeral detail  
With a speech and nothing I can say  
I'm just a soldier on a funeral detail  
With a speech and nothing I can say





## Finding Strength In Shared Experiences

As a Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer with a long history with SW:S, Rick Loomis had always dreamed of bringing together a group of fellow photojournalists who had served alongside veterans. Those men and women who embedded themselves with soldiers, sharing the truth of what our veterans experience on the battlefield. They were brothers and sisters, united by their desire to tell the stories of those who couldn't.

In late September, 2022, SW:S made it happen, hosting the first retreat of its kind comprised totally of photojournalists. The attendees came from all over the world, including one participant from Afghanistan who had taken two days to get there. It was a rare group, made up of some of the most accomplished photojournalists in their field.

For these photojournalists, who often work in isolation and as competitors, the retreat was a reminder that they have a support network. It was a chance to connect with others who understood their struggles and to find comfort in the fact that they were not alone.

During the retreat, photojournalist Ben Lowy shared, "*When you're a combat photographer, you're comfortable with the idea that you're going into a warzone.*" Along with the horrors he witnessed and photographed, having a career that was dependent on conflict and tragedy kept him up at night.

It was a sentiment that many of the photojournalists could relate to. They were drawn to conflict zones because they believed that their work could make a difference, that their images could bring attention to the plight of those affected by war, tragedy, and conflict. But it was a double-edged sword.

As the weekend progressed, Ben opened up more about his struggles. "*Although I've spent time processing my feelings,*" he said, "*when you put voice and physicality to something, and put it out there, it becomes real. Then you have to confront how it makes you feel.*"

One of the songs that came out of this experience was a tribute to 9/11 written by photojournalist Aristide Economopoulos and songwriter Danny Myrick. It was a heartfelt and emotional song in part because Danny had also lost friends in the attack. As he played it for the group, there was not a dry eye in the house. For many of them, it was a reminder of why they do what they do and the sacrifices that they had made to tell the stories of those affected by war and conflict.

As the weekend came to a close, they said their goodbyes, feeling stronger for having had the opportunity to come together in this unique way. The retreat had been a chance to confront their feelings and to find comfort and strength in the support and understanding of others.

Photojournalist Retreat, Beaver Hollow, NY, September 2022  
Photo: Matt Burkhart

# Ghosts In My Mind

Aristide Economopoulos / Danny Myrick

8:22 am still hungover from sake  
Phone rings beside me  
9/11/01 it was 70 and sunny  
I started running  
Jersey City ferry ride  
The moment that I arrived

Raining dust from the sky  
Images burned in my eyes  
All the photos I've taken  
Life won't erase them  
Even after all of this time  
They still haunt me night after night  
Ghosts in my mind

Liberty and Broadway  
NYPD said no entry  
Maybe that's what saved me  
Beautiful autumn sky suddenly  
Angels and ashes loud metal crashing  
Funny that I didn't go far  
Found a war zone in my backyard

Raining dust from the sky  
Images burned in my eyes  
All the photos I've taken  
Life won't erase them  
Even after all of this time  
They still haunt me night after night  
Ghosts in my mind

What happened to me  
Played like a sad movie  
Scene after scene  
Sometimes I can't sleep

Demons are calling  
While bodies are falling  
And I captured it all

Raining dust from the sky  
Images burned in my eyes  
All the photos I've taken  
Life won't erase them  
Even after all of this time  
They still haunt me night after night  
Ghosts in my mind  
They still haunt me night after night  
Ghosts in my mind





## Our Partnerships Make Us Stronger

There is strength that comes with working collaboratively. It requires opening your mind and heart to different realities and possibilities. This requires comfort with uncertainty; in its essence, building partnerships is a creative process.

This is at the core of SongwritingWith:Soldiers. Our partnerships make the sum greater than its parts.

By working with the EOD Warrior Foundation and Boulder Crest Foundation, SongwritingWith:Soldiers is part of a broader network of organizations dedicated to supporting veterans. Together we know that our partnership is making a real difference.

Working together through creativity to build connections has always been a fundamental strength of SW:S, and we saw an opportunity to leverage that strength by collaborating with these two amazing organizations. By working together, we have been able to leverage each other's strengths and resources to create innovative solutions to support veterans. Sometimes in the most unexpected ways.

Matt Meuser started his journey with these partners as a Warrior PATHH participant at Boulder Crest. During each PATHH, a SW:S songwriter joins the group for two days and together they all write a song. Terry Radigan was Matt's songwriter. He was later able to participate in an SW:S retreat and realized how helpful it would be for his wife Jess to also have some time to sit and process her experiences. So, then Jess attended an EOD Warrior spouse retreat where she coincidentally wrote with Terry. Tragically and very unexpectedly, within months of Jess' retreat, she suddenly passed away. This left a hole for everyone who knew Jess and Matt.

The Meuser family had a tremendous impact on everyone involved with the three organizations. Thankfully, working together we were all able to come together for the family and share stories, videos, and of course songs.

Through our partnerships, we are part of a broader network of organizations dedicated to supporting veterans at different stages of their lives. Together, SW:S, the EOD Warrior Foundation, and the Boulder Crest Foundation work tirelessly to support veterans, and we know that our partnership is making a real difference. We are proud of what we have achieved together and look forward to continuing our collaboration for many years to come.

Dedicated to the strength of Jess and Matt Meuser and their family.

# The Voice You Keep Inside

Jess Meuser / Terry Radigan

People tell me things  
I don't know why  
Barely a whisper  
But I can hear them screaming inside  
I can hear them screaming inside

I may be a stranger  
But I listen to those words  
Cause I know it's enough  
Sometimes just to be heard  
Just to be heard

But those voices echo in my mind  
Sometimes sleep is so hard to find  
I'm everybody's rock  
Pep rally band  
But sometimes I crumble  
Just like sand  
Still, I take it all in  
Even when my heart is breaking

I'm not that strong  
I'm just here  
In the moment  
With my hurt, my doubt  
And all my fears  
All my doubt  
And all my fears

But I'll always listen  
Should you walk my way  
And maybe I'll learn  
To let you do the same for me one day  
I'll let you do the same for me one day

Cause those voices echo in my mind  
And sometimes sleep is so hard to find  
I'm everybody's rock  
Pep rally band  
But sometimes inside I crumble  
Just like sand  
Still I take it all in  
Even when my heart is breaking

I hope they remember  
That I might have done some good  
This world can be so hard  
We're all so misunderstood  
So misunderstood

And deep down  
We're not that far apart  
I don't need to know your name  
To know your heart  
To know your heart

And I'll take it all in  
Yes, I'll take it all in  
Even when my heart is breaking  
Even when my heart is breaking





## From The Very First SW:S Retreat, The Story Continues

Nikki Shaw landed at the first SW:S retreat on her Harley, just days after returning from a long deployment in Iraq. No idea what she was in for, just agreeing to go with a friend. She could have backed out when he canceled, but she believed in honoring her word.

Jay Clementi arrived at the first retreat after a busy week of songwriting in Nashville. A professional writer for many years, he was well-versed in turning stories into chart-topping hits. He arrived ready to listen deeply and carry his co-writer's story into a tune. His mission was to honor their truth.

During the first night jam session, Jay shared a song he had written called, "Predator Road," a raw, pounding take on preparing for the fury and fire of combat. After the concert, Nikki approached Jay and said, "I know that song." She showed him a tattoo she had made with the song's chorus written inside two angel wings. Unbeknownst to all, the connecting through song had begun long before that retreat.

Jay couldn't get his guitar and writing pad out fast enough. They broke out the just-put-away-snack tray and settled in for a write. Nikki was ready to answer whatever questions Jay fired her way. Within a few kitchen-lit hours, the two wrote "Blackout" about Nikki's desperate attempts to sleep, to keep herself going.

As a combat veteran with 20 years of medical experience ranging from field combat medic to the United States Forces - Afghanistan Surgeon Sergeants Major and through deployments, moves, and eventual full retirement from the Army—Nikki has returned to retreats to volunteer as peer support and to special events to support the SW:S mission.

Now serving as a guide in a partner program for veterans committed to making a change in their own lives, Nikki has found a way to help others keep going. In this new role, Nikki shares, *"It is so rewarding to watch the students literally BLOOM before your eyes over the seven days. I am so grateful, blessed, and humbled to be part of this. I truly feel I have found my purpose in life."*

We are humbled by the strengths Nikki shares - bravery, authenticity, humor, love of learning, leadership, and perspective. And we are also grateful and blessed that as part of our origin story, she also includes SW:S as part of hers.

Nikki Shaw, Belton, TX, 2012  
Photo: Andy Dunaway

# Black Out

Nikki Shaw / Jay Clementi

It all started far from home  
At night when I was all alone  
Trying to dose off with my headphones on  
Praying for a couple winks  
But I just can't fall asleep  
Those images are just too strong  
God I wish I could  
It would feel so damn good  
To just

Black Out Black Out  
A cold 24 pack to knock me out  
Stop this dark and desperate dreaming  
Peaceful sleep is all I'm finding  
I just want to rack out but it kills me to say the only way  
Is to Black Out Black Out

Now it's back to normal life  
I can't forget the sacrifice  
I'm at home but I'm still there  
Everyday I play the game  
But I know I'm not the same  
My life is hanging on a prayer  
I stop buy the six around five  
At nine I'm feeling fine and by ten it's time

Black Out Black out  
A cold 24 pack to knock me out  
Stop this dark and desperate dreaming  
Peaceful sleep is all I'm finding  
I just want to rack out but it kills me to say the only way  
Is to Black Out Black Out

The only way I know  
To let the darkness go  
And rest my weary soul  
Is to...

Black Out Black Out  
With a cold 24 pack to knock me out  
Stop this dark and desperate dreaming  
Peaceful sleep is all I'm finding  
I just want to rack out but it kills me to say the only way  
Is to Black Out Black Out  
I'm gonna  
Black Out Black Out  
I'm so Tired  
I'm gonna Black Out





## Winner Again

By Brian Magerkurth, US Army Lieutenant Colonel (Retired)

Tyler Magerkurth, West Point Class of 2010 Graduate, Division 1 College Tennis Varsity Letter Winner, High School State Champion, social club leader, and my son, came back from his US Army deployment in Afghanistan in 2013, a changed man.

Why? Why would one of the happiest, emotionally sound and positive people, come back from war feeling like nothing he did was good enough?

During Tyler's deployment, he served as a platoon leader in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. Part of the job included leading his team on numerous missions all over Afghanistan assisting with the closure of 27 outlying combat outposts. Often their movements were attacked and after 9 months of living on edge, when Tyler returned home, he just didn't feel "right." He struggled with feeling like himself during normal day-to-day decisions and activities following his combat experience.

While Tyler was in Afghanistan, I attended a SongwritingWith:Soldiers retreat where I met SW:S co-founders, Darden Smith and Mary Judd and instantly connected with the mission of SW:S. While there, my West Point classmate Ray and I wrote a song about our experiences as leaders in the US Army. The process of "opening up" and sharing experiences was thoroughly impressive.

After Tyler's return from Afghanistan, he was struggling with symptoms of PTSD which was elevated while on base at Ft. Hood during the 2014 shootings. In 2016, I finally encouraged him to attend a SW:S retreat. Tyler went and poured out his emotions and shared that he wanted to regain his positive outlook on life, ultimately writing the song "Winner."

This SW:S experience for Tyler was the turning point in his Afghanistan recovery. SW:S had such a major impact that I have committed to support and assist SW:S to help other veterans in need of this emotional recovery experience by now serving on the SW:S Board of Directors.

Today, Tyler is working at a Music Marketing Agency while also training as a Recording Studio Engineer through a VA sponsored Vocational Rehab program, and is loving life as a Winner again!

Tyler Magerkurth with parents Brian and Valarie Magerkurth  
Photo Courtesy Brian Magerkurth

## Winner

Tyler Magerkurth / Darden Smith

Everything looks great on paper  
I should have no complaints  
But when I look in the mirror  
All I see is all that I ain't  
I used to be the life of the party  
Now I've got nothing to say  
Life comes towards me  
I walk the other way

I just want to feel like a winner  
I just want feel like a winner again

It's all fun and games on paper  
Till the day you understand  
That life is pretty random  
And it's all out of your hands  
I'm worn out from worrying bout what might go wrong  
I used to be so laid back  
I'd do anything to get the train  
Upright on the track

I just want to feel like a winner  
I just want to feel like a winner  
I just want feel like a winner again  
I just want to feel like a winner again

It's the lack of understanding  
It's the lack of love  
Makes a man get angry  
And pick up a gun  
We're all humans  
Brother can you see  
Underneath our skin  
You're the same as me

We all want to feel like a winner  
We all want to feel like a winner  
I just want to feel like a winner again  
I just want to feel like a winner again





## The Strength Of Sharing

The power of music is undeniable. Sharing music with others gives it even greater power, and using it to create an emotional connection between returning service members and civilians is critical to what we do. At every retreat, participants leave with their own unique song and two group songs. These songs are not just a collection of lyrics and melodies; they are a reflection of the deep emotions and experiences that participants have endured.

Former participants, and peer support, Teresa and Floyd Howes beautifully captured the essence of sharing the songs when they said, "*The SW:S community shares the language of music that opens our hearts to the reality of how much we need to express our pain, joy, and profound longing to connect with each other.*" It is through this shared language that participants are able to express themselves in a way that words alone cannot convey. These life-giving experiences not only provide a sense of hope and healing but also help to build bridges between military and civilian communities.

For those who are unable to attend a retreat, our online song library is an invaluable resource. With thousands of downloads each year, the library offers a diverse collection of songs that can be sorted and searched by various categories and keywords. Whether it's by military branch, conflict, or even by subjects such as pain, connection, and family, there is a song for everyone.

We have also worked to extend our music's reach through live concerts, bringing the power of these songs to even more people. The recent concerts in New York, Boston, and Luckenbach TX have touched the lives of many, bringing together veterans, active military, families, and civilians through the universal language of music.

As veteran Cliff Richardson and songwriter Will Kimbrough's collaboration demonstrates, the program also serves as a source of peace and strength. Cliff's words, "*I think we can all use a little bit of peace in our lives,*" ring true, and Will's performance of "Pillar of Peace" in Luckenbach is a testament to the power of music to inspire and uplift. Together, through the songwriting sessions, concerts and sharing the songs we can all find strength, hope and a sense of community.

## Pillar Of Peace

Cliff Richardson / Will Kimbrough

I've been all over this great big world  
I've done what I've done the best that I can  
And I've seen men be cruel and unkind  
To each other and this beautiful land  
We spend a whole lot of time just fooling ourselves  
Can't see the forest for the trees  
If we really look deep, most everyone knows  
That you got to be a pillar of peace

I've seen the world from 20,000 feet  
And I've seen it from the bottom of the sea  
I've thought a whole lot about what it means to be free  
And I want to be a pillar of peace

If we look past our differences I know we will see  
A whole lot of good all around  
Nothing is forever except for the earth  
So I keep both my feet on the ground

I've seen the world from 20,000 feet  
And I've seen it from the bottom of the sea  
I've thought a whole lot about what it means to be free  
And I want to be a pillar of peace

A good man he don't have to be rich  
And a poor man don't have to be bad  
A wise man's knowledge ain't just in a degree  
If he shares everything that he can  
Things don't always go my way  
And life ain't all about me  
But you know if we all work together  
We'd all be pillars of peace

I've seen the world from 20,000 feet  
And I've seen it from the bottom of the sea  
I've thought a whole lot about what it means to be free  
And I want to be a pillar of peace

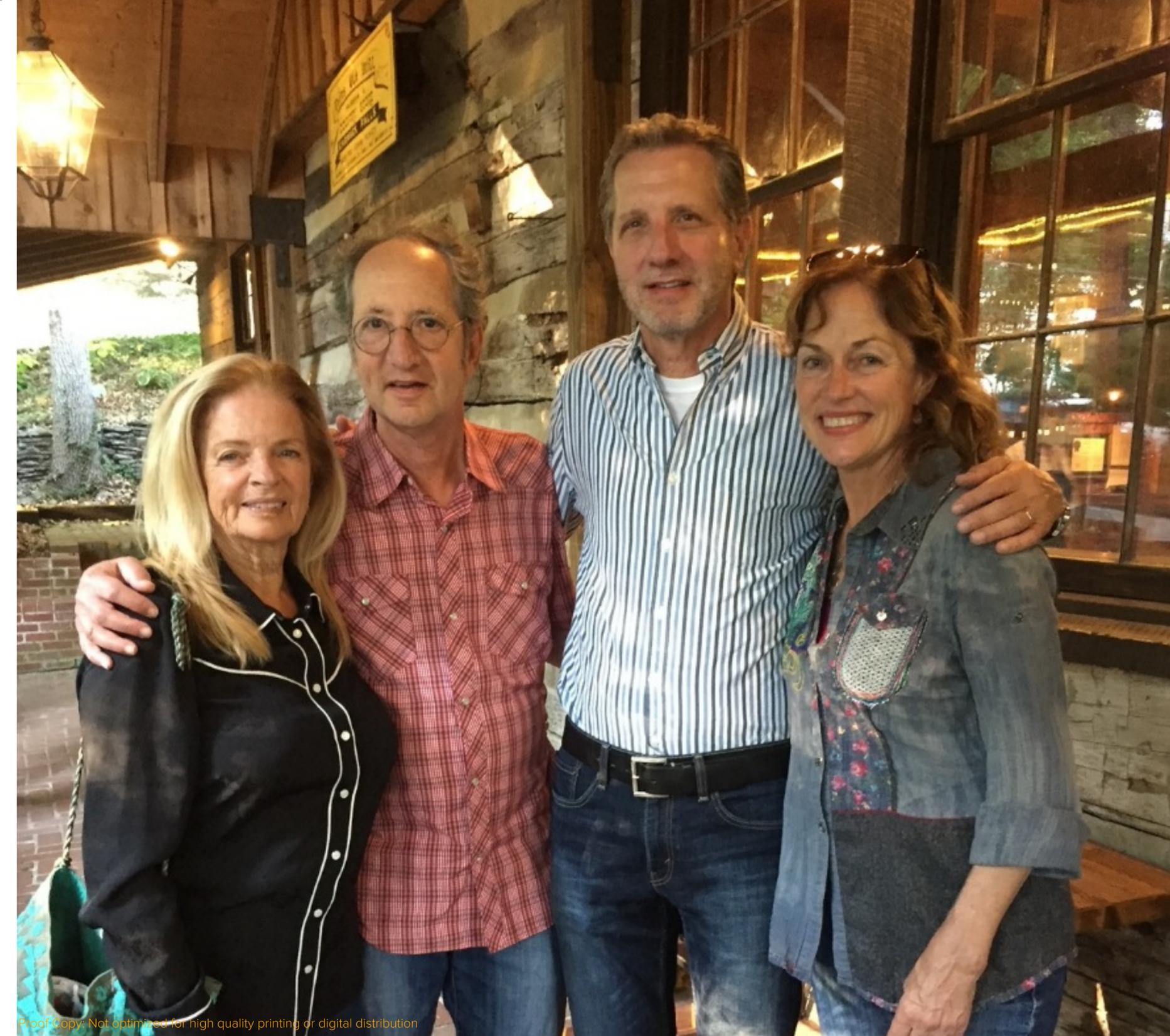
I want to be a pillar of peace

Life is meant to be loved  
Life is meant to be lived  
Life ain't made for regret  
You know good friends and family and lessons we learn  
I don't ever want to forget  
No I ain't ever gonna forget

I've seen the world from 20,000 feet  
And I've seen it from the bottom of the sea  
I've thought a whole lot about what it means to be free  
And I want to be a pillar of peace

I've seen the world from 20,000 feet  
And I've seen it from the bottom of the sea  
Thought a whole lot about what it means to be free  
And I want to be a pillar of peace  
Yeah I want to be a pillar of peace  
Oh want to be a pillar of peace  
And I'm gonna be a pillar of peace





## Stronger Together

I have witnessed first-hand the strength of SongwritingWith:Soldiers and marveled at its ability to evolve, grow and thrive amidst a world that is forever changing.

Serving on the organization's Board for the past eight years, the last six as its Chairman and President, has given me a distinct perspective and the opportunity to work alongside a group of incredible people whose passion and talents have allowed us to serve the veteran community in ways that no one could have imaged when Darden Smith and Mary Judd co-founded SongwritingWith:Soldiers ten years ago.

We have been able to take their incredible vision and hard work and successfully transition from a founder-led organization with its inherent limits, to an organization with endless possibilities, led by a team of seasoned professionals, highly skilled in running and growing a non-profit.

This year we will be completing our most ambitious schedule ever, holding 11 weekend retreats and delivering the songwriting component in over 130 Warrior PATHH programs across the country. In total, we'll be co-writing songs with over 1000 members of the veteran community and we'll be adding over 200 new stories to our song catalog.

Through it all we have found strength through partnerships and the work we've been able to forge together – whether it's custom programs with Boulder Crest Foundation and Wounded Warrior Project; research with Home Base, Harvard University and Massachusetts General Hospital; or being invited by Berklee College of Music to be a featured speaker at their symposium exploring the role that music can play in veteran wellness.

Yet, even with everything we've accomplished, it's still hard to fully convey to someone what happens in a retreat without them actually experiencing it for themselves. Try as we might, words never seem adequate or capable of capturing the emotions and transformations that we get to witness.

There really is something magical that seems to happen. How else do you explain the veteran who says that they have tried every kind of therapy and prescribed drug and that, "they all feel like band-aids compared to what I just experienced in your retreat." Or the veteran who decides to share things in a songwriting session that they had never before revealed to their spouse, or anyone for that matter. Or the couple on the verge of divorce who emerge from a retreat committed to trying to work things out. Or the veteran at one of our retreats who proclaims it's the first time he's slept straight through the night in over 30 years.

Alison and Glenn Leopold with Gary Leopold and Mary Judd at 2019 training retreat in Tennessee

What is it about our program that allows people to reveal themselves, tell their most heartfelt stories and take a step forward?

Is it because a veteran discovers they are co-writing with one of the most skilled songwriters on the planet, and they feel compelled to share their truth and give themselves fully to someone who is committed to listening deeply and giving so fully to them? Is it because the participants are given time to breathe and reflect, physically removed from the commotion and everyday stress that surrounds them? Maybe it's because we focus on identifying strengths and new ways to tap into veins of creativity they never knew they had. Perhaps it's the opportunity to share the retreat with other veterans whose stories and experiences align so closely with their own. Or is it the belief that maybe, just maybe, someone else will hear their story and that it might provide them with a sense of connection, understanding, and relief?

In truth, it's probably all these things and much more. Our own carefully crafted mix of art and science. Caring and recognition. Community and calm. All thoughtfully woven together into a program that delivers a unique experience that we know is changing lives – for the better

There's no doubt that the strength of our programs sits at the heart of our organization. But we also find strength in never standing still. Never believing we are done. Never settling for "it's good enough." And, never, ever, straying from our mission or our values.

With your help and support we are building an organization for the long term to serve a need that remains ever present. There are still many more lives we can touch with our music. Many more people who can benefit from having these important stories heard. Many more ways we can measure the impact and further prove music's ability to heal.

For me, personally, it's been a great honor and privilege to help lead this organization and an experience for which I will be forever grateful. My fellow Board members inspire me and together with our incredible staff, talented songwriters, and generous supporters, we've been able to lift SongwritingWith:Soldiers ever higher. To witness the strength and sacrifices of our veteran community and to be able to help improve their lives through the power of song has indeed been the gift of a lifetime.

The simple fact that you are now holding this book and reading our stories makes you a part of this incredible journey and for that I say thank you.

Because together, we stand stronger than ever.



Gary Leopold  
Board Chairman & President

Belton, TX, May 2018  
Photo: Michael O'Brien





## In Gratitude

We are grateful for every donation that has ever been made to support our organization and the well-being of our veterans and their families. We would like to recognize the following gifts received Jan 1, 2022 – December 31, 2022 and to extend our thanks to our donors and everyone who has helped us on this incredible journey.

### \$50,000 to \$75,000

Danette and Randy Smith,♫

Anonymous,♫ • Franziska and Bruno Mancina,♫

### \$25,000 to \$49,999

Rita A. Aranow Family Fund • Common Sense Fund • Curb Records • Giselle and Steve Rohleder

### \$10,000 to \$24,999

Anonymous • The ASCAP Foundation • Antonia and Vladimer Kulaev Cultural Heritage Fund  
The Beacon Impact Fund • Luke Bryan/Crash My Playa • Dennis and Kandace Eakin • Lanette and John Kinnaird  
Thomas and Barbara Kornreich • Gary Leopold and Kim Colombi,♫ • Pepper Evans and Robert Lieber  
The Cynthia & George Mitchell Foundation • NAMM Foundation • Nashville Oktoberfest  
V3Gate Foundation • Veterans United Foundation • Becky and Tom Wafer

### \$5,000 to \$9,999

Louis & Anne Abrons Foundation • Anonymous • Ruth and Timothy Carey  
Jeffrey Denniston • Insperty • Gerald L. Lennard Foundation  
Luckenbach Texas • The Memorial Foundation • Debra Fram and Eric Schwartz

♫ denotes 10th Anniversary Multi-Year Gift

Photos Top Left to Bottom Right: Lauren Petracca, Ed Rode, Lauren Petracca, Ed Rode, Lauren Petracca, Bill Albrecht, Lauren Petracca, Bill Albrecht, Lauren Petracca



## In Gratitude (continued)

### \$2,500 to \$4,999

Anonymous • Cris and John Graham • Randolph Business Resources  
The V3Gate Foundation • M and R Vest Foundation

### \$1,000 to \$2,499

Kathy and Carlo Agneta • Linda and David Bergey • Sam Bigelow • Easton Brice  
Ann and Frank Bumstead • Libby and Frank Duff • Peter Gallagher  
Kansas State University Foundation • The Lamond Family Fund • Valarie and Brian Magerkurth  
The Nesler Family Fund • Lynn and Jonathan Norton • Otto-Whalley Family Foundation  
Stephanie and Lee Spiegel Family Charitable Fund • Tri County Council Vietnam Era Veterans

### 2022 Monthly Donors

Terry Bare • Shannon Belcher • David Brower • Elizabeth L Burnam • Iris Davis • Tom Eisiminger  
Richard Erikson • Julie and Thomas Guthrie • Nancy Heinzen • Dan Henderson Jr  
Mary and Dennis Judd • Rachel Kennon • Meredith and Adrian Krygowski • Valarie and Brian Magerkurth  
Joan Maute • David Neybert • Kristin Starling • Brian Thompson • William Yockey

We would like to extend a special thanks to Mike, Cathy, Justin, and Angela Godfrey  
of the Barilla Foundation for their support.



RED LIPSTICK/WAR PAINT, ORIGINAL Drop D version  
Bonnie B  
Shawn Tillman

Well I may not look to you like a woman who has been to war  
But I've been through some things that I've never told anyone before  
And I was raised by grandmama who taught me to take my troubles to the L  
Girl get your red lipstick/ it's time for cherries jubilee  
Put your war paint on  
You better tread lightly  
Cause you can't see my gun

Cause Miss Page kept a pistol by her Bible on her bedstand at night  
And my mama she will always be a soldier but she never liked to fight  
You know sweet-talking Southern women won't always kill you with kindness ev  
Girl get your red lipstick  
Put your war paint on  
You better tread lightly  
I'm trained to use this gun

I didn't want to be like them but somehow I guess I've turned out that way  
I've realized that life is just a balance of strength and grace  
Rarely do well-behaved women make history anyway  
Girl - red lipstick

*SO GET MY RED LIPSTICK  
TIME TO PUT MY WA  
YOU BETTER TREAD LIGHTLY*

## Special Thanks

As we find our passions and our strengths, we're better able to build connections and creativity. Through this reflective look at strengths, we hope you see your own strengths and ways they impact the world around you. We know that our community is our ultimate strength. We would like to extend a very special thank you to our 2022 Board of Directors, Staff and Partners.

Gary Leopold, Chairman and President  
Barbara Kornreich, Secretary  
Harry Ballan, Treasurer  
Aaron Bowlin, Director  
Easton Brice, Director  
Mary Judd, Director / Co-Founder  
Brian Magerkurth, Director  
Don Navor, Director

Kristin Starling, Executive Director  
Jay Clementi, Music Director  
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Angee Rose, Collaboration Manager  
Meredith Krygowski, Database Manager

Boulder Crest Foundation • Wounded Warrior Project • Big Red Barn Retreat  
Camp Southern Ground • Gratitude America • Permission to Start Dreaming Foundation  
Sheep Dog Impact Assistance • Travis Mills Foundation

Thanks to Mary Judd for contributing her writing talents, to Melissa Houck and Gary Leopold for hours of writing and editing and to Scott Feguson for his graphic design skills for this book and the many hours he spends on retreat books throughout the year.



Front Cover and Photo Above: Lauren Petracca