

SongwritingWith:Soldiers

Reflections On Our Journey



SongwritingWith:Soldiers.

songwritingwithsoldiers.org



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REFLECTIONS ON OUR JOURNEY

A black and white photograph capturing a poignant moment in a grassy field. In the background, a group of people, including men, women, and children, are standing in a loose line, some with their arms around each other, suggesting a gathering or a shared experience. The foreground is dominated by three acoustic guitars lying on the grass. The largest guitar is in the lower right, with its strap draped over it. Two smaller guitars are positioned further back and to the left. The scene is set against a backdrop of dense trees, creating a sense of a secluded, natural environment. The overall mood is reflective and somber.

Reflections On Our Journey

Photo: Andy Dunaway

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“The magic in song only happens when the words give destination and meaning to the music, and the music gives wings to the words. Together as a song they will go places you’ve never been before. The reason is obvious: words make you think thoughts. Music makes you feel a feeling. But a song makes you feel a thought. That’s the great advantage, to feel the thought ... and what’s why you can teach more through song and you can rouse more through song than all the prose in the world or all the poems.”

– Yip Harburg, lyricist and composer of such famous songs as “Somewhere Over the Rainbow”

Photo: Stacy Pearsall



Foreword

The book in your hands is a testament to persistence, courage and hope. Every SongwritingWith:Soldiers (SW:S) retreat alumnus has held their story and the resulting song in their hands in much the same way. After each retreat, a book with photos and the songs written at that retreat goes out to the service members and/or their family members who wrote songs. The book is a time capsule of the weekend and brings back memories of the moments and community created in that special weekend. Afterwards, it is shared with friends and family and often bridges understanding in a way that words alone cannot.

For active-duty participants like Nikki Shaw, who recently sent us this photo from deployment, the photos and memories serve as a lifeline. “I wouldn’t be standing here today if it wasn’t for this program,” she says.

This book holds just ten stories out of hundreds that have emerged through our program. It offers a glimpse into the broad range of men and women we work with and the depth of experiences they bring to our retreats. It reveals the post-songwriting impact on participants as well as the far-reaching ripple effect of the songs on the unknown listener. We are honored to share this special book with you.

We also want to express our gratitude to every individual who has attended a SW:S retreat and to those who have supported them. Thank you to our past and present donors, volunteers, board members, staff and artists.

There are more songs to write. We welcome you on this journey.

Kristin Starling
SW:S Executive Director

SW:S Veteran and deployed Army Officer, MSG Nikki Shaw, Afghanistan.
Photo: Courtesy of Nikki Shaw



Introduction

With more than 400 songs written through SongwritingWith:Soldiers programs we have seen firsthand the impact of “feeling a thought.” From the obvious—the veteran moved by hearing his/her painful story turned into a beautiful song, to the more subtle—the civilian sitting next to him, nodding with new understanding of a shared pain, or a momentous rebound from loss. The songs are immediately changing lives. Their “echo” continues the transformation, near and far.

We have heard from strangers who discovered our songs online and found comfort—a connection they thought was utterly impossible. They feel the songs are speaking their own truths, or that of a loved one, revealing shared struggles, pains or triumphs. “I don’t feel so alone,” they say.

These powerful connections are sparked by the many who show up so fully at our retreats—the veterans from all branches and conflicts; the spouses and family members, some of whom lost loved ones in battle. The combat videographers and photographers. The professional songwriters whose stories and skills build trust and inspiration for our participants. The facilitators who set the safe, inspiring tone and provide creativity workshops to keep the connections strong after the retreats.

We could pave countless miles with photos and stories from our program, revealing how each song impacts the writers, the listeners and those they connect with afterwards.

Let us begin here with a selection of stories—some from recent events and others with seeds sown at our earliest retreats. We feel that each carries a spark of hope for humanity. Thank you to all who help SongwritingWith:Soldiers link words and music in order to elevate us all.

Mary Judd
SW:S Co-Founder / Program Director

Darden Smith
SW:S Co-Founder / Creative Director

US Army Veteran Palermo Deschamp, left, with songwriters Darrell Scott and Gary Nicholson at our retreat in Belton, Texas.
Photo: Stacy Pearsall



High Notes

Selected Stories from Our Community

Photo: Jake Herrie



A Note from a SW:S Songwriter

Georgia Middleman

This is a picture taken at a recent SW:S retreat. I had just written with a father who carried so much pain. My job was to collaborate with him and get that pain down on paper so he could get it out of his body and be able to look at it from a distance.

Something amazing happens when you do that: when you hear the words of your own story wrapped in a melody. All that sadness and confusion magically turns into a key that, when done right, can unlock that prison door and let your soul see the story for exactly what it is—a story. It doesn't have to define you anymore. You're free to move forward, not forgetting what happened, but making space for forgiveness. And freedom.

And once you have your song, it's like having a secret magic power you can call on at any time—when you forget and need to remember what it was like to feel that kind of clarity and release—all you have to do is hit PLAY.

I'm just a civilian songwriter. By the grace of God, I've never had to see or do what these soldiers have had to see or do.

But writing songs with them has introduced me to real live superheroes. They have taught me, and continue to teach me, that if they can live with what they've seen and done (and sometimes didn't do), then so can I. I can be braver. I can take chances and not beat myself up when I fall down. I can be a superhero too.

What I love about this picture is that we have just finished our song and my co-writer has asked if he can carry my guitar for me. I'm 5'2" and my guitar gets heavy sometimes, but I'm used to carrying it everywhere I go. It's my job.

But what if today, even in the smallest of ways, I helped lighten his load? If I did, I am eternally grateful. I can think of no nobler act than to use my gift as a songwriter to help another feel just a little bit lighter. And in his generous offer of asking to help carry my guitar ... well, this soldier just lightened mine. And isn't that what we're supposed to do in this life? Have each other's backs? Take turns carrying the load when it gets to be too much?

Songwriter Georgia Middleman and Gold Star Parent after writing their song at a retreat.
Photo: Matt Lankes



Building Strength

A mother of five, US Army veteran Michelle Roberts had tried to end her life, more than once. We found this out through her song. We also learned that her five children were her “five reasons” to keep living. Everyone at the retreat could see the relief and renewed sense of purpose in Michelle’s eyes as the retreat came to an end. What we learned from Michelle after the retreat gave us more reasons to keep going.

Dear Mary,

I was very apprehensive to sign up for SongwritingWith:Soldiers because while I have always loved music, I seriously doubted my ability to create a song. In addition to that apprehension surrounding my musical ability, I am not a group person and new experiences are usually not something I seek. I suffer from PTSD and multiple physical ailments related to my military service during Operation Desert Shield/Storm and few treatments have ever relieved my symptoms. However, SongwritingWith:Soldiers absolutely transformed my life.

I arrived at the ranch and tried to avoid as many people as I could until the time we all met in the great room and were all introduced to the Musicians. I began with arms crossed and skeptical, but by the end of the first jam session, I began to feel a bit of the sludge of my life wear away, my toes were tapping, and I actually started to smile again. This trend continued throughout the weekend and my heart began to heal.

When it was finally my time to write my song with Bonnie Bishop, I was nervous, but excited. Throughout the songwriting process I could feel something inside of me change and open up. The ability to transform trauma into music was extremely cathartic. Hearing my song was profound and really helped me to process some difficult emotions.

SW:S changed my life. It helped me fall in love with music again. It helped me realize I am not alone. SW:S wiped away years of mud that was stuck on my soul and gave me a way to deal with heavy thoughts and emotions that had been crushing me for so many years. I can't explain what sort of magic happened, but SW:S healed me more than years of therapy. I cannot emphasize enough how amazing and life changing this one weekend was for myself and my family.

Thank you so much Mary for this beautiful gift!

*All my love,
Michelle Roberts*

Michelle Roberts (left) at a SW:S retreat in Colorado.
Photo: Rick Loomis

All Five Reasons

Michelle Roberts / Bonnie Bishop

There's five good reasons that I'm still alive
One's sixteen and he's just learning how to drive
The day he was born it was raining outside
My handsome boy pushed the sun through the sky

Hush little baby and don't you cry
Mama's still here she just wishes she could fly
Cause Jesus was waiting on the other side of light
He's holding my hand but it's not my time

My oldest was born when I turned twenty-five
It was hard to believe in the beauty of life
Cause war leaves you demons that never go away
She gave me hope and a reason to stay

Hush little baby and don't you cry
Mama's still here she just wishes she could fly
Cause Jesus was waiting on the other side of light
He's holding my hand but it's not my time

My second to oldest has learned how to stray
He won't choose war, he won't turn out this way
He still stops by I see that beautiful smile
Someday I hope he'll stay for a while

Hush little baby and don't you cry
Mama's still here she just wishes she could fly
Cause Jesus was waiting on the other side of light
He's holding my hand but it's not my time

It's been two years ago was the last time I tried
My son walked in on me and begged me not to die
He was the one who was always full of joy
Now I carry the shame of what I stole from that boy

Hush little baby and don't you cry
Mama's still here she just wishes she could fly
Cause Jesus was waiting on the other side of light
He's holding my hand but it's not my time

One last good reason my sweet baby girl
She's a summer's breeze in my dark crazy world
All five angels keep my boots on the ground
They're God's plan for keeping me around

Hush little baby and don't you cry
Mama's still here she just wishes she could fly
Cause Jesus was waiting on the other side of light
He's holding my hand but it's not my time





Building Bridges

One of the hardest things our SW:S veterans feel about transitioning home from combat is the belief that civilians don’t really want to know what they’ve been through. They feel like they have no one to talk to at a time when connecting is critical for readjustment. The results of feeling disconnected have led to rising depression, anxiety, loneliness and a staggering suicide rate.

At a recent SongwritingWith:Soldiers retreat held for Gold Star siblings, space was created for connecting. The participants, all sisters of the fallen, spent the weekend sharing their experiences and pain. They wrote songs, individually and as a group, expressing sorrow and anger, while celebrating beautiful memories of their brothers.

As we have witnessed at every retreat, the effect of turning pain into something beautiful—a song—and sharing it with others is deeply cathartic. So, we weren’t surprised that several of the sisters immediately sent their song to family members at home.

All of us in attendance were affected by the bravery and willingness of the sisters to participate so fully throughout

the weekend. For Paul Downs, a US Marine veteran who works at Boulder Crest Retreat, their songs struck an unexpected, transformative chord.

“The whole weekend was truly eye-opening for me! Hearing the perspectives of six different sisters—as a brother who almost didn’t survive my own story—was an amazing perspective I never thought I’d have the honor of hearing.”

Paul, like many combat veterans who have difficulty transitioning home, nearly ended his own life. Fortunately, he heard about Boulder Crest’s PATHH Program and was able to get his life on track and find love and renewed purpose. He wrote about it in a song with Terry Radigan called "Tell Me When You Wanna Hear More".

Just as the sisters’ songs gave Paul deeper understanding about their experiences, and how his own actions would have affected his sisters, Paul’s song can gives all of us greater understanding about the power of being willing to listen and learn from each other and support each other for the long term.

Evins Mill, the site of our Tennessee retreat.
Photo: Ed Rode

Tell Me When You Wanna Hear More

Paul Downs / Terry Radigan

On a cheap plastic hanger
Hung who I was on the back of the door
Tell me when you wanna hear more
Tell me when you wanna hear more

Eleven years I was right at home
With the black and white of war
Tell me when you wanna hear more
Tell me when you wanna hear more

Here's piece one
Here's piece two
Here is me
Talking to you
Trying to tell it
Show it in the kindest way
Hoping I don't hold back the hardest part
That'll keep me running away

Gas in the tank
Gas in the truck
Built a bomb just to be sure
Tell me when you wanna hear more
Tell me when you wanna hear more

Here's piece five
Here's piece six
Here's me telling
All of it
Trying to give it
Show it in the kindest way
And I'm still good
I'm not running away

It's in the telling
It's in the living
Each and every piece
I found forgiving
It's in the work
It's in the words
I find the love
That we both deserve

This moment with you
Right here, right now
Is what I'm living for
Tell me when you wanna hear more
Tell me when you wanna hear more
Cause I've never been so sure
I'm telling you I wanna hear more





From Behind the Lens: Memorial Day 2019

Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer Rick Loomis has worked several retreats with us, not only bringing his artistic expertise, but also his wisdom and empathy from being embedded in war zones. We have no doubt that Rick and many of his photographer colleagues could fill volumes with their stories. We are honored that Rick stepped out from behind the camera to share one very close to his heart.

“Well, it's Memorial Day...well, it was up until about an hour ago. I can't think of a better time to share a song that I co-wrote last month with my good friend Darden Smith. He co-founded SongwritingWith:Soldiers. SW:S is an amazing organization that I've been working with for the last few years that pairs professional songwriters up with veterans with PTSD (and sometimes family members...and, as it turns out, occasionally a photojournalist) to create songs from often traumatic events in what can be a transformative experience.

So this is a song about how my son, Casey Aaron Loomis, got his name.

He's named after U.S. Marine Aaron Austin who gave his life during the battle of Falluja, Iraq on April 26, 2004. I had randomly photographed him for the 'Los Angeles Times' reading a letter from home the day before he was killed. The day he died was the scene of ferocious fighting and a day I thought I might die too. Aaron died defending his fellow Marines, and ultimately died defending me too. I helped three Marines carry his gravely wounded body from the battlefield that day.

And every year since, I call his mom De'on Miller on the 26th of April...a date that changed so many people's lives forever.

Nothing can fix the hole in De'on's heart but I'm glad to know that my son carries his name to honor his memory and I hope my Aaron grows up perhaps not to be a Marine (dad would prefer Marine Biologist) but to have the core values of honor, courage and commitment.

My hat is off to all the men and women who serve. And to those I rolled with during years of embeds in Iraq and Afghanistan a special thanks to you for sharing your experience with me so that I could share it with a greater audience. Media members now and throughout history have put their own lives on the line to tell important stories that otherwise would not be told. Today I think about those media friends of mine who also made the ultimate sacrifice.

Sure, I did yard work today and went to the beach with my family, but this is precisely what this day is meant to be about.”

– Rick Loomis

Photo: Rick Loomis, taken while on assignment in Afghanistan.

You Carry His Name

Rick Loomis / Darden Smith

Fifteen years ago in Falluja
I watched a good man fall
How quickly life can blow right through you
How quick you can lose it all

And I've never been the same
I've never been the same
That's why you carry his name
Forever

On a long-distance call to his mother
I cried with her talking about her son
I barely knew him but he was my brother
But to her he was the only one

And I've never been the same
I've never been the same
That's why you carry his name
Forever

When a man like that leaves this world
He leaves a hole that's hard to fill
I called her yesterday to say I love you
It hurt back then, it's hurting still

And I've never been the same
I've never been the same
That's why you carry his name
Forever





Community Support

Trish and Jeff Dawson

“Just wanted to let you and the team know that one of the participants from the retreat, Jeff Dawson, was injured in combat about four weeks ago. He is currently at Walter Reed recovering and his wife Trish is by his side, along with other family members. He is making progress and we are very hopeful for a full recovery. Trish listened to their song after she received the news of his injury and found great comfort in it, until he returned stateside for care.”

We received the above message from Sherri Beck, Program Director of the EOD Warrior Foundation. She had attended the retreat with Jeff, Trish and four other couples from the EOD (Explosive Ordnance Disposal) community.

News of Jeff’s injuries spread fast. Our traditional post-retreat group call became that much more urgent.

Within days, all couples from the retreat gathered on the SW:S conference line, sharing memories from the retreat along with words of support for Jeff and Trish, who had managed to make the call from their room at a VA Hospital in Tampa, Florida.

Reading the lyrics to “Gibraltar,” the song they wrote with Maia Sharp, reveals the strength behind those smiles.

Trish and Jeff Dawson after joining the SW:S Retreat group follow-up call.
Photo: Trish Dawson



Gibraltar

Jeff and Trish Dawson / Maia Sharp

I can't believe you see what you see
Then you come home to me with a goofy smile
I can't believe we laugh like we do
After we've been through trial after trial

You're my rock and when you're gone
I could break down or sing this song

I'm not gonna crumble
I'm not gonna falter
I'm not gonna disappear under the water
I'm gonna stay stronger than I've ever known
But when you come home
You're still my Gibraltar

It's not like when you walk through the door
I'm not strong anymore and we're not burning both ends
of the candle
But I know with you by my side
Even the craziest rollercoaster ride
Is nothing we can't handle

My rock and when you're gone
I could slide off or carry on

I'm not gonna crumble
I'm not gonna falter
I'm not gonna disappear under the water
I'm gonna stay stronger than I've ever known
But when you come home
You're still my Gibraltar

Hard to find peace when the only constant is chaos
When the lonely takes over and I can't have you in my
arms

I'm not gonna crumble
I'm not gonna falter
I'm not gonna disappear under the water
Yeah, I'm stronger than I've ever known
And when you come home
You're my Gibraltar

Jeff and Trish Dawson and songwriter Maia Sharp
at a retreat for EOD Couples at Boulder Crest Retreat, Arizona.
Photo: Bill Albrecth

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Third Time's A Charm

We’ve heard the clichés: “Timing is everything ... Third time’s a charm.” In the case of US Army Veteran, Tom Griswold (‘Griz’ to his friends) these clichés ring quite true.

At the urging of his battle-buddy, SW:S participant Rob Spohr, Griz applied two times to attend a SongwritingWith:Soldiers retreat, cancelling both at the last minute. Admittedly on a self-destructive path that landed him in the hospital after crashing his motorcycle, he knew he needed to trust his friend.

He decided he was ready if given one more chance to attend a retreat. This time he showed up, open and willing to participate fully, connecting with other veterans who were dealing with the same issues.

He shared his combat and transition home story with Nashville Hall of Fame songwriter, Gary Burr, who later said that Griz’s perspective on living made a lasting impression on him.

Burr says that when he wrote with Griz, he asked him what kind of work he does now.

“I etch names into tombstones,” he said.
“I bet that’s hard, especially outdoors in the heat?” said Burr.
“It’s not bad. I wear a helmet, goggles, protective gear. It feels like being in Iraq, except I’m not getting shot at.”
“Whenever I am struggling with something,” said Burr, “I remember ‘I’m not getting shot at’ ...”

Gary performed the song that he and Griz wrote that day on the 2019 PBS concert special “Songwriting With Soldiers.” When hearing the news that his song, “Something Ain’t Right,” was featured on the show, Griz sent this message:

*“... I’ve said it many times but I’ll say it again.
That weekend was life changing for me.
Got me to get in gear.
Since my retreat I’ve gotten engaged,
become a father to a beautiful daughter.
And now we’re shopping for houses.
Life has been good. So thank you for what you do...”*

*With the sincerest thanks,
Tom Griswold*

Tom Griswold and songwriter Gary Burr at a SW:S retreat in Rensselaerville, New York.
Photo: Mary Judd



Something Ain't Right

Tom Griswold / Gary Burr

Something ain't right when a kid's 19
And he can't sleep at night 'cause of things
He's seen that day
Something ain't right when you wanna leave your bed
And a blast of cocaine and some Walker Red's
The only way

When chaos is your comfort zone
When you're in a crowd but you're all alone
And you always need an exit sign in sight
Something ain't right
Something ain't right

Something ain't right when to feel alive
You need to strap on your gear and take a long fast ride
Down the highway
Something ain't right when what you've been through
Makes simple words like "I love you"
So hard to say

When "I'm Ok" is just a lie
You're telling friends that are stopping by
And you're slow to talk but so damn
Quick to fight
Well, something ain't right
Something ain't right

Please be patient with me
Kindness is all I need
When a boy comes home
A different man
It's okay if you don't understand
Just remember when he's pacing
The floor at night
Something ain't right
Something ain't right

No something ain't right

Songwriter Gary Burr writes with US Army Veteran Tom Griswold.
Photo: Rick Loomis

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The Unseen Weight

“Music – it’s an Rx for the invisible wounds of the soul.” – Don Navor

Retired Army LTC Donald Navor received three Bronze Stars V for valor and the Combat Infantryman’s Badge during his tour in Vietnam. He served as Infantry Platoon Leader and Company Commander in combat. He continued with deployments to the Middle East and Latin America. His bravery and leadership skills were easy to spot and readily employed during his military service and, later, in his business career. However, what was nearly impossible to see was the fifty years of suffering he carried inside.

Fortunately, Don made his way to an SW:S retreat with his wife Kathleen. Unsure of what to expect, he surprised himself with his willingness to share personal struggles during the opening night group songwriting session. The next morning, Don sat down with songwriter Michael Bradford. Their discussion lifted some heavy memories, again surprising Don with how much he had been carrying around and the toll it was taking on him. Together, the two crafted his stories into the song “El Camino.”

The experience proved transformational for Don. He sent the following note:

“Divine Providence and Serendipity got me to the retreat. One has to listen for the dots. It started with Kathleen hearing Mary Gauthier on NPR and bringing her album ‘Rifles and Rosary Beads’ to my attention. I downloaded it, listened to it and immediately related to the pain of those soldiers. Fast-forward to Mary playing a show at the Loving Cup where upon meeting her she looked into my eyes and said, ‘You should meet Mary Judd.’ I did and you mentioned the retreat in Colorado. I mustered up the courage and applied. I had just joined a VA group and was very vulnerable. Discussing my war experiences with fellow combat Veterans was a new and daunting experience. While the group therapy was beneficial in helping me reveal PTSD issues that I lived with as normal for someone who had seen combat (anger and nightmares) something was still missing.

US Army veteran Don Navor (left), and dog Brixton, with Michael Bradford at Heart J Center, Loveland, Colorado.
Photo: Rick Loomis

Initially, I had no idea what the retreat was about. I admit that from registration to departure I was overtaken by a spirit of place never before experienced. Writing my song from my story as told to Mike Bradford, who grew up on the battlefields of Detroit, has given me a touchstone to coexist with my demons in real time. I thought that I would get something to make the haunting memories disappear. Not to be the case. Rather, what resulted was a song that captures who I am, where I came from, the demons of war, and the reality that I live in today coexisting with those demons of war. I somehow was released with the advent of my song. The songwriting process, with all its tears, was a catharsis never before experienced.

When words fail, music speaks. SW:S is a real-world testament to music’s effectiveness in taking hardened combat Veterans to their ‘good place.’ Songwriters with their good souls and beautiful minds are the point people to help those veterans feel again.”

The peer support and creative tools provided by the retreat helped reinforce Don’s commitment to get the help he needed.

A few months later, SW:S was featured at the 2019 Congressional Medal of Honor event in New York City. Three songs were performed including “I Can’t Save You Now” written during the retreat by Don’s wife, Kathleen. She was in New York City near the Twin Towers on 9/11 and her song tells the story of how Don helped her keep moving and stay strong.

Together, their songs and inspiring stories fill us with awe and hope. They remind us that music can indeed soothe the soul and fuel one’s heart.

To hear Don and Kathleen’s songs, and hundreds of others, please visit our website at songwritingwithsoldiers.org.

US Army veteran Don Navor at the 2019 Congressional Medal of Honor event in New York City with (l-r) SW:S Co-Founder Mary Judd, Don’s wife Kathleen Cattrall, songwriter Bonnie Bishop, SW:S Board Member Barbara Kornreich. Photo: Courtesy Kathleen Cattrall.





Out of the Chair Into the Spotlight

“Before coming to the retreat, I had the date, the time and the way I was going to end my life,” Joshua Geartz told SW:S Co-Founder, Mary Judd in 2015. “Writing my song with Mary Gauthier gave me hope—something I had lost.”

He had arrived a quiet somber man, with his service dog never far from his wheelchair. By the end of the weekend, he was a different man. “I told Mary things I hadn’t been able to tell anyone. She was able to hear it and to turn it into the perfect song, ‘Still on the Ride’.”

Josh returned to a SW:S retreat in 2016 with a financial donation to the program. He and his wife, Lisa, also a U.S. Army veteran, had been raising funds in creative ways, including a 422-mile wheelchair journey across three states. They were determined to do all they could to help the program that had turned their lives around. We even coaxed Lisa into the songwriting chair, to write her own song, “An Army of One.”

Josh returned in 2017 to provide Peer Support at a retreat. His wheelchair now out of sight, a cane in his hand and a

determined smile on his face. By 2018, the cane too, was long gone. This time, he carried a case of harmonicas for the Creative Compositions workshop he led for the other participants at the retreat.

Serving as Peer Support, Josh eases participants nerves. His warmth, genuine enthusiasm and hard-fought smile inspire all. Each year, more veterans find their way to SongwritingWith:Soldiers because of Josh’s inspiring song and story.

Josh Geartz beautifully represents the immeasurable effect that can come from one individual attending a retreat.

In the summer of 2019, Josh stood in the spotlight at the War Memorial Auditorium in Nashville, Tennessee. He performed “Still on the Ride” with Mary Gauthier for the “Songwriting With Soldiers” PBS concert special. Their performance brought the crowd to its feet and joy to many hearts. Once again, Josh showed up for his fellow veterans and SW:S. “I will do anything to help other veterans have the opportunity I have had.”

Top: Joshua Geartz, wife Lisa (seated right) and SW:S Co-Founder Mary Judd. Photo: Rick Loomis
Bottom: Josh Geartz and Mary Gauthier on stage in Nashville, Tennessee, 2019. Photo: John Partipilo

Reaching the Unknown Listener

"I found out about this organization three weeks ago. Since that time, I have told and shared it with so many and listened to almost every song more than once."

The other came back a different person and he will never be the same.

As a mom you see the man they are and respect that, but you can also remember like it was yesterday, when they ran to you as little boys if they got hurt or scared. And it certainly brings up a whole new side of yourself when you hear the self-serving political parties, or somebody says, 'They only joined to get a free education...' when you know the only reason they went was because they love this country.

Songwriter Will Kimbrough's guitar case.
Photo: Jake Herrle



Encore!

On August 1, 2019, many of our songwriters gathered on stage at Nashville’s War Memorial Auditorium to sing “I Am a Soldier,” a song written at one of the first SongwritingWith:Soldiers retreats. The song was one of 18 performed at a concert filmed for a PBS special about our program that was broadcast nationally in October 2019.

This concert was funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and generously underwritten by Sweetwater Sound. We offer special thanks to PBS and presenting PBS station WCTE, and producer Todd Jarrell and his excellent team who brought this opportunity to us. We also send a special thank you to our friends at American Airlines for providing American Airlines AAdvantage® miles for veterans to travel to attend the show and see their songs and stories shared with so many.

The performance brought the audience to its feet and beautifully acknowledged the bravery and generosity of those who shared their stories through song. We feel that this combination of the veterans’ courage and the songwriters’ ability to transform the stories into song, then perform them with such passion and respect, makes for a lasting gift to humanity.

These are the war stories of our time—with the power to teach, uplift and heal.

One song, one connection at a time, we are changing lives.

To hear all the songs featured in this book, and discover more about SongwritingWith:Soldiers and our work, please visit our website at songwritingwithsoldiers.org.

On stage at the Nashville War Memorial Auditorium (from left) Gary Burr, Gary Nicholson, Georgia Middleman, Maia Sharp, Bonnie Bishop, Radney Foster, James House, Mary Gauthier, Darden Smith and Jay Clementi.
Photo: John Partipilo



Participants and staff gather for a final farewell at SongwritingWith:Soldiers first retreat in Tennessee.
Photo: Ed Rode

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. While it's impossible in this first public volume to list every individual, organization and foundation we would like to recognize the leadership gifts we've received December 15, 2018 – December 31, 2019, and to extend our thanks to them and everyone who has helped us on this incredible journey.

\$100,000

Danette and Randy Smith

\$50,000+

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Thank You

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Many thanks to each of you who help make it possible for these retreats to be held, for these songs to be written, for helping us share them with the world. Together we are changing lives, one song at a time.



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