



SongwritingWith:Soldiers.

songwritingwithsoldiers.org

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Reflections On Creativity



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REFLECTIONS ON CREATIVITY



A photograph of a green guitar case with a pink guitar inside, and a teal guitar on a wooden floor. The scene is set in a room with a brick fireplace and a wooden window shutter. The text "Reflections On Creativity" is overlaid in the center.

Reflections On Creativity

Photo: Michael O'Brien

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“There is no doubt that creativity is the most important human resource of all. Without creativity, there would be no progress, and we would be forever repeating the same patterns.”

— Edward de Bono, Scientist, Philosopher, Father of Lateral Thinking

Veteran Santonio Hoke and songwriter Ashley Cleveland in Texas in 2016.
Photo: Matt Lankes



Why Creativity Is Essential

“Songs can say what we haven’t been able to.” — Gold Star Parent

The mission of SongwritingWith:Soldiers is to use collaborative songwriting to build creativity, connections and strengths. Why? Because we believe these are each essential to living a good life. Why creativity first? Because it immediately expands possibilities and a sense of hope.

With nearly 1,000 songs written through our program, we know the power of creativity by what our participants tell us.

Creativity has enormous potential to improve lives. Taking time to be creative opens us to new possibilities and helps us connect to ourselves and to each other. Many of our participants — military veterans and active duty — have experienced varying degrees of trauma, isolation, and difficulty transitioning home. They do not view themselves as creative. Many have forgotten or haven’t kindled their natural creativity since before their service.

“My song gives me comfort when I need a reminder of what I can do.” — Jaime Santiago, US Army veteran

“Trauma often renders people numb,” says Bessel van der Kolk, MD, trauma researcher, educator and author of *The New York Times* best seller ‘The Body Keeps the Score.’ *“Without imagination there is no hope, no chance to envision a better future, no place to go, no goal to reach.”*

Research shows that everyday creativity — doing simple things like cooking, drawing, writing and singing — helps improve emotional health, building happier, hope-filled lives. Research also shows that your intention — *wanting* to do something creative — matters more than what you do or how well you do it. We nudge the desire to be creative and provide the safe space for creativity to grow. Collaborating with another person who listens and cares about us feels good. Songwriting together sparks our imagination and builds confidence to try new things. We hear it time after time.

“I used to feel so alone, like no one would understand what I have been through. To sit down with a complete stranger and turn my story into a song, that changed my life.” — Chris Chirco, US Army veteran

Throughout this book you will find examples of how our program builds creativity, sparks connections and ignites strengths. You’ll also get a peek at how these connections benefit others *outside* of the military. Sharing these inspiring stories with you here is an honor. May they spark more hope and excitement in your life, too!

US Army Veteran Jaime Santiago and his daughter Nealys creating together in Texas in 2016.
Photo: Matt Lankes



Covid Tested Our Creativity

SongwritingWith:Soldiers thrives by bringing people together. Face-to-face songwriting sessions. Live performances. Group conversations. Creativity workshops. Meditation. Until February 2020, we did this primarily at in-person retreats with great success.

Enter Covid-19. As the pandemic raged, forcing lockdowns and quarantines, the need for our program only intensified. Faced with the pressing question of how to continue our work and keep our community engaged, safely, we looked to our mission for the answer, then got creative! We expanded our use of collaborative songwriting to build creativity, connections and strengths.

How? We increased our online engagement opportunities with a “Songs From Home” live concert series, group songwriting sessions and one-day retreats, creativity courses and in-depth interviews featuring SW:S songwriters, veterans and special guests. We also continued to provide our collaborative songwriting module for Boulder Crest’s Warrior PATHH program.

We succeeded in serving hundreds of veterans and their families throughout this very challenging year. We also gathered powerful insights (and data) regarding the impact of collaborating *online*. For example, outcomes from our “Pre- and Post-” survey for the online session with “Veterans working in Covid Relief” included:

- 52% decrease in “I feel stress”
- 32% increase in “Your sense of positivity (elevated energy/ positive emotions/hopefulness)”
- 43% increase in “Sense of control over your situation”

These significant results have inspired us to now include online sessions as an integral part of our program moving forward, providing us a delivery method that will help us reach even more veterans and their families.

This past year exemplifies how creativity can fuel positive change. Join us as we reflect on this remarkable year through stories, photos and lyrics. You’ll see how creativity, collaboration and your support continue to change lives!

Compilation of screenshots from 2020 online sessions.



Getting Creative

Selected Stories from Our Community

Boulder Crest Virginia in 2020.
Photo courtesy of songwriter Maia Sharp.



Igniting Change

“When I attended the SongwritingWith:Soldiers retreat in Belton, I found my voice. I found the courage I needed to share my story. I realized how much I could help others.”
— Brandy Davidson, US Army Veteran

Brandy Davidson, a US Army Veteran attended our first all-female retreat near Fort Hood, TX in 2014. She shared challenges and insights with SW:S Co-Founder Mary Judd during a “Creatively Strong” online interview.

“It was hard for me to get to the retreat. I was going through so much stuff. I am so glad I pushed through because I was able to write a song, ‘Iraq’, with Mary Gauthier and it talked about what happened to me. That gave me more confidence.

At first I was nervous for others to hear it. Sometimes your truth doesn’t always make everybody else look good. But, I was to the point where I was ready to tell my truth. It is never the intention to make others look bad, but it has every intention to relieve you of some stress. So, with that on my mind, I was able to push forward, tell my truth, what I went through, coming from me.

Mary Gauthier told me she had veterans and active duty soldiers come up to her after hearing my song. They’d say they weren’t aware and it gave them more understanding of what was happening. It felt good to know that the message was clear, that it reached somebody. That feels really good.

I went through a lot of depression and fortunately pushed through to continue writing. I found my voice through that retreat. I found the courage I needed to share my story. I realized how much I could help others. (Since the retreat, Brandy has had her work published in two anthologies: Beyond the Rank and Where’d I Go?)”

Her message to all today: *“Be a person of change.”*

“I have had a lot of conversations that don’t feel good. But if you come in with an open mind and listen, and to hear what the individual is saying, I think change will come.”

We are thankful to Brandy and all the veterans who have bravely shared their stories to help ignite change.

Brandy Davidson in Texas in 2014.
Photo: Stacy Pearsall



Inspire Lasting Gifts

“Thanks again for reigniting a smoldering ember!!”
— Rob Rogers, EOD Soldier

Keeping creativity and connections thriving within our community has been a priority of SongwritingWith:Soldiers since day one. As the pandemic deepened, our effort only strengthened. In October 2020 we gathered veterans from our first Tennessee retreat for a full day online event with a team of four songwriters and staff providing one-on-one writing sessions, meditation, strengths discussion and closure ceremony all delivered through Zoom.

Veteran Rob Rogers had lost his father only days before, but he was determined to participate. He knew well the profound impact it would have on him and countless others as his message before the session shows:

“...almost a year ago I was training some young EOD Soldiers at Fort Campbell and got to talking with one of them. I noticed that he was using words in our conversation that led me to believe he may be on the verge of suicide. I asked him if I could play him a song or two on my phone and he agreed. I played him three (from SW:S): ‘Waiting on the Boom’ by Radney Foster, ‘Something’s Not Right’ by Gary Burr and ‘Still on the Ride’ by Mary Gauthier (I picked these because I have them downloaded and they are some of my favorites). When the last one finished he looked up with red teary eyes and said, ‘I could have written all of those songs’ like he could connect with each one. We talked awhile longer and I believe he walked away with a new outlook and an additional coping mechanism. Now I don’t know if I really helped that young man or not, but because of everything you and the rest of the amazing talented

staff have done for me, I can’t help but share my testimony and maybe help someone else who was hurting as much as I was prior to my first retreat. So thank you again from the bottom of my heart. I know Wendy feels the same for everything you do and have done for all of us Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines and families!!”

Rob and Wendy, like so many military couples, have deep, giving souls. After attending the EOD Couple’s Retreat in 2018, where they wrote “Pick’n Up the Pieces” with James House and attended painting and writing workshops, they felt their creativity “reignited” as Rob says. They volunteered as Peer Support for the 2019 Tennessee retreat and showed up with a truly historic gift, a quilt handmade by Wendy for SW:S.

When Rob entered the Zoom room for the 2020 TN online reunion, he devoted his writing session to his late father, composing “My Old Man,” with Gary Burr. Afterwards he wrote:

“Why these incredibly talented songwriters take so much time out of their busy lives to help us everyday veterans still blows (no EOD pun intended) my mind. It truly touches me to the depth of my inner being that compassion still lives on in this crazy world. And even though the songs we write may not ever be nominated for any award or be played on radio stations nationwide, I would like them to know that to each of us they are priceless pieces of magical music, worthy of all the stardom in the world.”

Wendy Rogers presents SW:S with her handmade quilt in Tennessee in 2019.
Photo: Ed Rode

My Old Man

Robert “Buck” Rogers / Gary Burr

Dad can you see me from way up there
I want you to know I'll be all right
We're all singing “Broken Halos” down here
All grown up so we won't fight

Duct tape and baling wire
A little chewing gum, that'll do the trick
The older you got the less you could do
Till you finally found something that you couldn't fix
All that's left for me right now
Is to live a life that will make you proud
Cause I'd rather ship off to Afghanistan
Fight 'em hand to hand
Than let down my old man

This 5'5” giant man
Built a house on a hill with his two hands
Five young kids in an old RV
Headed North to Alaska eventually
A covered porch, a Zane Grey book
We broke a rule...we got “the look”
Serving was an easy choice
We followed your lead and heard your voice
The older I get the smarter you got
You set the bar high so thanks a lot
Cause I'd rather ship off to Afghanistan
Fight 'em hand to hand
Than let down my old man

“Don't lock me up in a jar of clay”
Isn't that what you used to say?
When you're up in Heaven, breathing free
You tell God that all you need...is

Duct tape and baling wire
A little chewing gum, that'll do the trick
The older you got the less you could do
Till you finally found something that you couldn't fix
All that's left for me right now
Is to live a life that will make you proud
Cause I'd rather ship off to Afghanistan
Fight 'em hand to hand
Than let down my old man





John Wall with Margaret Bentley in Texas in 2016.
Photo: Matt Lankes

Sparking Connections

“I don’t think these pieces are lost on those who haven’t served in the military...Writing and expressing these things has a whole lot more to do with getting through things, using good tools that are there. Expressing is so helpful.”
– John Wall, US Army

SW:S staffer Margaret Bentley was a few minutes into her online Creative Writing session when another participant entered the Zoom room. *“Hello everyone, I am John Wall,”* he said.

John, a US Army veteran was the first veteran to write a song with us, more than 10 years ago, before we were officially SongwritingWith:Soldiers. He told us early on how much he loved to write. *“My battle buddy and I actually shared a journal, taking turns writing in it.”* He had become a frequent volunteer at retreats over the years, but we hadn’t heard from him in a while. What a surprise to see him join the class!

“I’ve been writing these short vignettes lately,” he said.

“Do you have any you want to read?” Margaret asked.

“I just sent this one to Mary Judd, she thought you all might like to hear it.” He cleared his throat, quieted his little dog, then read:

*Instead of the light of dawn, there’s the gray space of sleep,
the time before sleep where the veteran sees the demons
and wishes to stare at the moon instead.
It seems better to just stay awake until
your body makes you fall asleep...
or you can decide to keep drinking,
watch TV and pass out.
The morning light breaks and ground hog day begins again
and again and again.
The warrior’s mind does not seem to rest.*

“That piece was written on an anniversary of one of my soldier’s deaths. It is one of my short little pieces I put down on paper. Writing these really allows me to go there, and then be able to go to another active duty or veteran and connect. And, I don’t think these pieces are lost on those who haven’t served in the military, either. Post traumatic stress is something that affects a lot of people. Writing and expressing these things has a whole lot more to do with getting through things, using good tools that are there. Expressing is so helpful.”

Fellow Army veteran Teresa Howes agreed. *“Thank you, John. That really resonated. I had one of those nights last night.”*

Since the Zoom call, the two veterans have remained in contact, sharing work and feedback with each other, and with others on our private Facebook Group page. The creative sparks keep inspiring countless connections.

Daddy's Son

Marcin Budnik / John “P.K.” Kelly / Sean Bode / Jay Clementi

It's your daddy son, yeah I'm right here
I never went away I'm always near
You can talk to me when you're feeling down
When your heart is hurting or your scared I'll be around
I never got to talk about faith, life or love
The good the bad the ugly that's all a part of growing up

We never got to play catch, so charge the ball
Give your best
Never start a fight but never back down
Sometimes walking away is standing your ground
If your heart pounds to a rockabilly song
If your hair stands up when someone's being wronged
And you wonder where all that comes from
It's your daddy son

When it comes to girls, there's gonna be some drama
Don't forget to show respect just like I did your momma
And when it comes to her, you gotta pour on those kisses
It's gotta be enough for the both of us
for all the ones I'm missing
Always do your best son I'll be proud of you
Prove things to yourself it's all you gotta do

We never got to play catch, so charge the ball
Give your best
Never start a fight but never back down
Sometimes walking away is standing your ground
If your heart pounds to a rockabilly song
If your hair stands up when someone's being wronged
And you wonder where all that comes from
It's your daddy son

One day you'll search for meaning
for what your life has in store
The secret is finding something that's worth dying for

We never got to play catch, so charge the ball
Give your best
Never start a fight but never back down
Sometimes walking away is standing your ground
If your heart pounds to a rockabilly song
If your hair stands up when someone's being wronged
You have the spirit of a warrior the heart of a gentleman
You're your daddy's son





Across Generations

Two months into the Covid-19 pandemic, with in-person retreats and songwriting sessions on hold, the organization created a variety of online offerings to keep the SW:S community engaged and to share more of the songs and stories with the world.

One effort, the “Songs from Home” online concert series (funded through an anonymous donor) brought the songwriters, songs, stories and live comments straight into viewers’ homes on a variety of leading social media platforms, connecting so many of us at a time of great uncertainty. The impact was profound, with past participants connecting with other veterans, military families and civilians from around the globe.

For his show, SW:S Music Director, Jay Clementi selected a handful of songs from nearly 100 that he’s written through the program. With a keen memory for detail and a loving heart, he honored such struggles as the EOD couple fighting to keep love alive and the wounded combat veteran missing his former self.

He shared the story of two Army Rangers, Marcin Budnik and P.K. Kelly, who met at a retreat and discovered they both knew a Ranger, Sgt. McPherson, recently killed in combat. Together, with Jay, they wrote “Daddy’s Son” a song for McPherson’s baby boy, filled with loving, fatherly advice.

“These men brought such an honest, unique perspective,” Jay said “because they knew McPherson so well, missed him terribly and had an unwavering reverence for him. I felt an immediate connection with them and to Sgt. McPherson because he was a husband and a father of a son.”

Before he played the song, Jay introduced his sons, Christian and Brody, who were only 8- and 11-years old when he started working with SW:S in 2012. Now accomplished musicians with an acclaimed band called CB30 who have appeared on ABC’s Christmas special with Reba McEntire and opened for Luke Bryan, the young men brought gorgeous harmonies and deep respect to the performance with their father.

“The fact that this song is a direct message to McPherson’s son, and my sons were able to perform it with me still gives me chills,” Jay said. “I’m filled with thankfulness and deep respect for a man that died fighting for our freedom.”

For the duration of the show, Christian and Brody listened to their father share more stories and provided harmonies when he sang, inhabiting each song with heart.

“We have grown up around SW:S getting to know the people, the songs, and a lot of the stories behind them,” the boys said. “It was amazing to play a few as a family for the first time, especially ‘Daddy’s Son’, that was always one of our favorites. We felt like it was extra special getting to sing it with our Dad. Our hearts go out to the family it was written for.”

Jay Clementi is joined by sons Christian (left) and Brody (center) in one of the 11 Songs From Home online concerts performed in April and May of 2020.



Writing With Warrior PATHH

“...It’s not about writing a hit, or even a ‘killer song’. It’s about deep listening, building trust, building stronger bridges between people, opening up hearts.”
— Will Kimbrough, Songwriter

Along with our retreat partnership with Boulder Crest Foundation, SW:S provides a specific songwriting module for their Warrior PATHH program for post-traumatic growth. Every month we assign individual songwriters to travel to various Warrior PATHH locations around the US. They write with 6–8 soldiers who have already been immersed in the program for several days in advance of our songwriter’s arrival and the subsequent songwriting session. We are now scheduled to deliver more than 120 of these sessions per year.

SW:S songwriter, Will Kimbrough, describes the experience:

“The songs are in service to the story, just as the songwriter is in service to the soldier. And, Warrior PATHH songs... Man, that’s a whole other corner of the universe. It’s high wire act, the one shot deal. Hit and run.

To crack open those closed hearts... The songwriter comes in just in time to run around with a bucket and catch the stories as they rain down. A couple hours later, we all take a sip from the same dipper of cool water — The song we have distilled from everyone’s stories. Hearts opened just a little bit more.

I remember writing ‘Cucumber Water Blues’ at what was probably my most difficult Warrior PATHH writing session. A group of soldiers, over half of whom had tried to take their own lives. All but one, however, seeing a little glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel. Beginning to look forward to a tomorrow. One soldier was not there yet. Or should I say, wasn’t there. He was still in total darkness. The Songwriter at a Warrior PATHH Session has to manage time, trying to give each soldier enough time to tell their story. This one soldier in the dark needed more time. But the other soldiers recognized that. And, just as the writing session seemed to grind to an awkward halt, one of the soldiers laughed and pointed out how funny it was that we were sitting around a fire pit at sundown in the foothills of the Appalachia, telling war stories and drinking cucumber spa water, wishing it was homemade moonshine. Yes, you had to be there. I can tell you the laughter was real and full on. The outlier... Laughed as hard as anyone else. 15 minutes later, right on time, the song was written. Smiles. Eye contact. Connection.”

These powerful connections and resulting songs continue to serve as touchstones for the veterans and first responders. The creativity continually reviving, multiplying the positive.

SW:S songwriter Will Kimbrough shares a photo adventure from his Warrior PATHH travels in 2020.

Cucumber Water Blues

Tony H. / TJ P. / Allen M. / Luis C. / Will Kimbrough

I wasn't where I wanted to be
My dad was disappointed in me
I broke my family, I lost my team
Doom and gloom was all I could see
I wasn't who I wanted to be
I didn't want to be here at all
I was sitting in my man cave trying hard to look brave
waiting for the shoe to fall

I found me some brothers who care
Everybody's story is mine
Sitting around the fire, drinking cucumber water
Wishing it was homemade shine

my new story started today
My dreams can't be taken away
20 minutes meditating sure beats medicating
24 hours a day
It don't make a lot of sense
But at least I got a plan
It wasn't very pleasing
living for a reason that I didn't understand

I found me some brothers who care
Everybody's story is mine
Sitting around the fire, drinking cucumber water
Wishing it was homemade shine

Isolation, desperation
Ain't got no faith at all
This six inch prison in my head
Just got way to small
Same old trouble same old mess
Same old regimen of meds
Got to stop the train of thoughts
Circling in my head

I found me some brothers who care
Everybody's story is mine
Sitting around the fire, drinking cucumber water
Wishing it was homemade shine





Moving From Invisible To Invincible

“When I attended SongwritingWith:Soldiers back in 2015, my PTSD was so severe that I did not want to be seen...”
— Sandi Primous, US Army Veteran

“As a 20-year Army Combat Veteran, I led 197 soldiers into a hostile combat zone in Iraq during the war on terrorism. By the time I attended SongwritingWith:Soldiers back in 2015, my PTSD was so severe that I did not want to be seen, much less seen or captured on film. I was so ashamed of who I was and what I represented.

I started healing after writing just two songs with SW:S. One Called ‘Questions’ and another, my anthem, called ‘You Can’t Break Me Down.’ It was like I transformed from INVISIBLE to INVINCIBLE! I am Sandi (with an ‘i’) the ‘i’ stands for INSPIRATION.

Thank you, SongwritingWith:Soldiers for giving me the courage to make my first step towards fresh air six years ago. I cannot imagine where I would be if I had not attended your workshop when I did.”

Sandi has returned as peer support at our Texas retreats and assists at special events. Her son, Stephon, spent a day helping out at a retreat, too, and surprised us all by sharing a poem he had written, inspired by his mother’s courage and the Me Too movement.

Sandi and Stephon Primous in Texas in 2018.
Photo: Michael O'Brien

You Can't Break Me Down

Sandi Primous / Georgia Middleman

I don't wanna live like this
I just wanna have somebody
Who adores me
Is that too much to ask

I don't wanna live with all this fear
Always looking over my shoulder
All this time on my hands
Now that my kids are older

I wanna say that I'm strong
Though I'm not right now
I wanna say I'll get through this
Though I really don't know how
But I'm a strong, strong woman
And I know I'm gonna be alright
You know why?
I'm Sandi with an i

I signed on at 17
Was a combat Veteran
I was airborne air assault
And master parachutist

I retired from the army
After serving 20 years
As a signal first sergeant
Not bad for a career

I wanna say that I'm strong
Though I'm not right now
I wanna say I'll get through this
Though I really don't know how
But I'm a strong, strong woman
And I know I'm gonna be alright
You know why?
I'm Sandi with an i
I'm Sandi with an i

I wanna tell that MST
Just try to get in my space
And I'll slam the door of my past
Right in your face
'Cause the good news is
You can't break me down this time
You know why?
I'm Sandi with an i
Sandi with an i
Improving
Independent
Inspiring
Sandi with an i





Amplifying Lives

“This profoundly changed my life and I can’t put my finger on exactly what it was. I guess maybe just knowing that I could express myself in a way that’s musical, or you know, just taking that layer of sludge off the top...and that just wears it down until you’re able to function more...I wouldn’t be here today if it weren’t for SongwritingWith:Soldiers.” — Michelle Roberts, US Army

You may remember Michelle Roberts from our previous Reflections book, how she wrote “Five Reasons” with Bonnie Bishop and found a renewed appreciation for life at our 2018 Colorado retreat.

In 2019, Michelle returned to our retreat at the Heart-J Center with her new husband, Army Veteran Corey Roberts, who she nudged to attend, knowing his love of music and need for more connections.

In November of 2020, Michelle returned again, this time as a featured guest on our “Creatively Strong” online interview series. Michelle inspired us again as she described how the retreat fueled her confidence and sparked a passion to serve others in a creative, productive way, which has led to she and Cory starting a real estate business that serves veterans. *“We know the specific needs and obstacles. It feels so good to create these win/win connections.”* When not busy with business or family, Michelle practices her guitar lessons and jams with Corey. She beams when talking about his talents.

Michelle and Corey’s journey beautifully exemplifies our mission – to use collaborative songwriting to build creativity, connections and strengths. We salute their courage, determination and continued willingness to grow creatively, together. As we know, the possibilities are endless!

Michelle and Corey Roberts in Colorado in 2019.
Photo: Bill Albrecht



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 January 1, 2020 – December 31, 2020 and to extend our thanks to our donors and everyone who has helped us on this incredible journey.

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Mark and Kellie Perry at Boulder Crest, Virginia in 2020.
Photo: Bill Albrect

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Special Thanks

Despite the challenges of 2020, SW:S did not pause in our mission to build **#CREATIVITY**, **#CONNECTIONS** and **#STRENGTHS** for veterans and active duty military in need. In the face of increased isolation and pressure on those living with PTSD, we're proud that our whole community—veterans, songwriters, board members, partners and supporters—rose to meet this moment with resilience and inspired action.

We would like to extend a very special thank you to Mike, Cathy, Justin and Angela Godfrey of The Barilla Foundation.

We would also like to thank our partners:

Boulder Crest Foundation • Wounded Warrior Project • Big Red Barn Retreat • Camp Southern Ground
Gratitude America • Heart-J Center • Randolph Business Resources • Travis Mills Foundation

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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.



Photo Above: Bill Albrect
Front Cover Photo: Ed Rode