

Creative Healing Connections, Inc.

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Report on First Annual Adirondack Arts & Reintegration Retreat

From August 10-12, 2009, Creative Healing Connections, Inc. held our first Adirondack Arts & Reintegration Retreat for women veterans. It took place at Wiawaka Holiday House on the southeastern shores of Lake George. This was a particularly fitting place to hold the retreat as Wiawaka is a nonprofit organization founded in 1903 by Mary Fuller as a place for respite for women immigrants and one of few retreats in the country created during the progressive era still serving its founding mission of respite for women. There is more information about Wiawaka at www.wiawaka.org.

The Arts & Reintegration Retreat was open to women who have served our country in any branch of the military at any time. Our goals were to allow our participants to connect with other women who have served our country; to focus on reintegration issues arising out of military service; to provide a safe space for participants to tell their stories in a variety of artistic contexts ranging from storytelling to music to dreamwork; to provide the opportunity for participants to achieve an enhanced sense of self and community; and to build a network for these women to take forward with them.

We had eleven women in attendance. Dates of service ranged from 1977 to still active. The services represented were the Army, Army National Guard, Air Force, Navy and Marines. Their experience ranged from a “full bird” Colonel who served in Iraq in 2007-2008 at the age of 56 to a 34 year old who returned home two months ago from a tour in the Army National Guard in Iraq. We had one veteran who suffers from Agent Orange exposure. We had several who are or have been homeless. All of the participants suffer from some form of PTSD as well as depression and anger.

We offered a dream workshop as well as storytelling and music. We provided numerous opportunities for these women to sit in a community circle and tell their stories. We also provided yoga, massage and Reiki which were all very enthusiastically received. In addition, the shores of Lake George beckoned. Swimming, hiking and boating were also part of the mix.

One of the measures of success of our retreats is the extent to which women feel safe enough to be willing to open up and share their deep stories. Working with this culture of women veterans rather than with women with cancer and chronic illness proved a big learning experience for all of us. It is completely understandable that anyone who has been placed in life threatening situations over an extended period of time might find it difficult to trust anyone. But over the course of our three days with them, we observed several things.

They immediately bonded with each other. They were thrilled to find there were other women who had had at least similar experiences. Over and over, they talked of the lack of availability

of support groups, the lack of connection with other women veterans and of their deep need for such connection.

As they grew more comfortable with their surroundings, with the staff and certainly with each other, they began to tell some stories. We were struck by the fact that these were not the stories of “war” as we might imagine them; not the stories of going out and facing the enemy. These were more the stories of what it was like to be one of 4 women in a battalion of 800 or the only woman in a troop. These were stories of not feeling as if they were listened to and stories of never knowing who to trust.

It became clear to us that it would be impossible in a three day period to expect to have these women reach a level of trust to tell the very deep stories. Yet on the last morning in our final “go-around”, the deeper stories began to emerge and it felt in a way as if this were the beginning of the retreat. Every woman has stated that she would like to return. It is our hope that as we reconvene next year, we will be starting in a place where trust can be reached much sooner.

In terms of how the participants were impacted by our program, we were particularly struck by their repeated appreciation of finally finding a community of women who have been through similar experiences. In addition, they were hugely impacted by the atmosphere at the retreat of not only acceptance and non-judgment, but also validation of their service and validation of their selves.

The grant monies given to us by the Charles R. Wood Foundation, the Glens Falls Foundation and the Pearsall Foundation as well as numerous private donations by individuals went in several directions. Part was used for scholarships, part for leadership fees and part for the infrastructure to make the retreat happen.

We are deeply appreciative of the confidence our sponsors and supporters have in our programs and of their willingness to help support this innovative retreat. Before leaving, each woman made sure she had the contact information for everyone else and they have all vowed to return next year and bring others with them.

Comments by Participants of 2009 Arts & Reintegration Retreat

This program needs to be expanded so more women could benefit.

This has been more than any retreat...that I have been to before.

Very positive

It was great. Now I can say I have a network.

There were no judgments. It was great.

Surprisingly very safe.

Did not feel I had to control emotions.

Encouraged, in fact.

I am not alone. There were others.

It really helps female veterans unwind and speak up.

I think it is a fantastic way to elicit emotional expression and reintegration.
This way I can understand myself a little better.

Creativity is SO important for healing!!
Listened to our stories without judgment.
Everything was perfect for me.

I don't know if the belly dancing was officially a workshop but I plan to start dancing
and using my body to express and heal myself.
Never tried yoga or Reiki before so it was a great chance to do so.
I know I need to incorporate all of these more.
Yoga was a little much for me.
This is the best that has happened to me.

What was your favorite thing about your experience at this retreat?

The laughter.
The physical space.
Chance to meet other people and bond.
A safe place to let myself go (or practice it), learn from the beauty and freedom of the
other women.
Women fellowship.
Freedom of expression in a non-judgmental space.
The way the women bonded with each other.
All; can not pick out just one. Thanks.
The location with the history of offering a beautiful respite for immigrant women.
Connecting with other women veterans.
Everything ... was awesome. Thank you.