



# Voices and Visions

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Senior year is all about moving forward. Well-versed in the project protocol, our seniors are hungry for the real world. They want to know that they can do work that matters. It's scary territory, entailing the kind of risk we students and teachers must be willing to take—to work together, cut loose from the confines of the curriculum and reach out to real people.

My teaching partner, Jeremy Farson, wanted our seniors to experience what it is like to function as a working artist—"to conceive, communicate, collaborate and create a product for a specific client and situation." He assigned the students to propose their artistic services to local organizations. Eager to collaborate in my first year of teaching at HTHI, and thrilled at the opportunity to have students writing for a real audience, I agreed to help the students research local organizations and develop an outreach portfolio including proposals, artistic resumes, and cover letters.

Meanwhile, as we studied *Beowulf* in my English class, we all became interested in the role of the "scop," a singer-storyteller, as an oral historian and preserver of the stories of the era's heroes. The conversation shifted: Who do our contemporary scops celebrate? Who should they celebrate? Who are our "unsung" heroes? These questions surfaced naturally, fueled by the students' deep sense of justice and fairness. I began to wonder if our outreach project could add, not only to the aesthetics of an organization, but also to its sense of worth.

In class we explored the scop's role as a healer. When Beowulf and his men returned home from horrendous battles, the king "began to put courteous questions to his old comrades in the high hall. He hankered to know every tale the Sea-Geats had to tell." Edward Tick contends in *War and the Soul* (2005) that this simple invitation to share their stories enabled warriors to transition back into their daily lives following their horrific experiences.

Later, as we read selections from Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (2009), we saw that modern returning soldiers have stories to tell, too, but they find few who are willing to listen and withhold judgment. O'Brien describes a character's desire to express what his Vietnam experience was really like: "The town could not talk, and would not listen. 'How would you like to hear about the war?' he might have asked, but the place could only blink and shrug."

It became clear that our outreach project could go deep. San Diego is a community rich with veterans from a multitude of wars, and unfortunately, a large number of them suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. Many are homeless, struggling with addictions, or simply trapped in the combat mindset. We knew that there was something very simple that we could

do for our San Diego veterans: listen.

In December 2009, nineteen students sat down with residents of the Veteran's Village of San Diego (VVSD). Each student listened to and recorded the story of one veteran. It was a beautiful day in itself, as each veteran received a rapt audience of one, but we took it a step further.



Following the interviews, students transcribed their recordings for VVSD, becoming oral historians. We then followed Anna Deveare Smith's model in *Twilight, Los Angeles* (2003) and composed a "documentary poem" for each veteran. Students reviewed their transcribed interview and selected parts of it that would encapsulate the veteran's story best in a sixty- to seventy-line poem, similar to a "found poem." I knew that presenting the various voices of the veterans would illuminate the authentic struggles of individuals along with larger issues of war and return. What I didn't anticipate was the deep commitment that students brought to capturing each man and woman's voice and story as vividly and accurately as possible. In what became a quintessential writing "lesson," the students had an audience, a purpose, and an urgent need to revise. They had a clear voice they wanted to maintain within each poem and the desire to craft it so as to preserve the tone, character and message of their very real subject.

Meanwhile, in Jeremy's art class, the students were creating paintings that represented each veteran's story. Each painting was student-designed, with input from the veteran. Many included a particular good luck charm that the veteran held dear. Some were more visceral—many of the men and women wanted an image of a particular place or battle that they struggled to recreate in their mind. Jeremy says, "The project became something much deeper than what I had set out to do. No longer could it be about creating a painting that matched the drapes and looked good over the sofa. It became an exercise in walking that fine line between accurately depicting a person's experiences in a painting and being sensitive to what might come across as trite, corny, or altogether inappropriate. They were dealing with stories that were deeply personal and emotionally complex."

At this point students became contemporary scopers. We invited the veterans to our school, and amidst a small audience of our students and faculty, each scoper read his or her poem while his painting was displayed in the foreground. Behind the speaker, images from the day of our interviews were projected. It was a day of remembrance, celebration, and acknowledgment of what these men and women continue to endure. Following the readings, students reconnected with the individuals they had honored and personally delivered their paintings. We compiled the documentary poems into a book for the Veteran's Village of San Diego.

Weeks after the event, I visited the Veteran's Village of San Diego and was greeted with stories of how our students' work has become a part of their recovery process. The paintings reside in their rooms and counseling offices, and the poems they heard have validated the experiences they continue to make sense of. Jerry Stadtmiller, counselor and Vietnam War veteran wrote to us: "You cared. Our hearts got that you cared. We shared with you parts of our hearts we haven't shared for years. And you listened. You didn't judge us. You didn't try to fix us. You listened and you cared. To be listened and to be heard without being judged, to us was to be honored. Your words and your art have sacred places in our hearts. And they always will."

We continue to remember the veterans' haunting stories and their commitment to recovery. One student remarked, "It was an eye-opener.... I really hope that Anthony got as much out of this as I did because this is truly one experience that I will never forget and will always keep close to my heart." Another added, "I felt a connection I've never felt to a complete stranger before, because from 'Hello, my name is...' to the actual reading of the poems, it was no longer a class project. I felt it was almost like my duty to share her story." The experience brought home to all of us the enduring power of art and stories, from the time of Beowulf to the

present day. As Tim O'Brien writes, "This too is true. Stories can save us."

*To learn more about this and other projects, visit Stephanie Lytle's and Jeremy Farson's digital portfolios at <http://dp.hightechhigh.org/~slytle>*

*and <http://dp.hightechhigh.org/~jfarson>*