

The

# ARTSGRAM

NATIONAL CREATIVE ARTS FESTIVAL



Air Force Veteran **Rebecca Heissler** sings her heart out.

Photo by Bruce Thiel

SUNDAY OCTOBER 14, 2012

# Music Brings New Meaning and Joy



Out of the darkness came hope, happiness and new friends – all because of an old broken down saxophone waiting to be played in a recreation therapy room at the Battle Creek VA Medical Center in Michigan.

“I have typically lived without family support, close friends or the benefit of meaningful, lasting relationships,” Army Veteran Kerry Blackie

said. “Loneliness and depression eventually took my business, then my home.”

As a homeless Veteran suffering from PTSD, Blackie’s life changed after he was accepted into the domiciliary program at the medical center. He began attending music therapy on a regular basis and discovered music was filling the empty spot he had in life.

As if something was calling for him, Blackie picked up the broken down saxophone and took a chance in trying something new. Today, after two years, Blackie owns a home and has three saxophones. He takes lessons and plays weekly at the medical center and several open mic clubs.

**“I have found new happiness and well-being within myself from the ability to play music,”**

Blackie said. “I’ve enriched my life in a way I didn’t know was possible, and I have gained motivation and desire to continue and grow.”

Blackie is thrilled to be part of the 2012 National Veterans Creative Arts Festival as a Therapeutic Arts Scholarship recipient. As a performing artist, he will be part of the chorus. “Music has brought me new meaning and joy to life that I’ve never had before,” Blackie said. “And I owe it all to the VA Domiciliary Program and Creative Arts Therapists Sharalyn Walkons-Davis and Dana Castanier at the Battle Creek VA Medical Center.”

*By Angela Taylor*

*Visual Information Specialist*

*Indianapolis VA Medical Center*

## Just the Right Therapy for Me

As anything in life, finding just the right fit can be a process – even for therapy. After experiencing therapies like writing and walking meditation, Veteran John Merrick found peace and fulfillment through painting and woodcarving. “I feel a personal accomplishment when I can stand back and see my artwork finished,” Merrick said. “I did that! And if you mess up, that’s why super glue was made.”

While participating in a Tai Chi class at the Raymond G. Murphy VA Medical Center in Albuquerque, N.M., Merrick noticed a National Veterans Creative Arts Festival poster and decided to enter his artwork. This year, Merrick’s woodcarving “Old Soldier” received first place in the Special Recognition Mental Health Challenges category. This category recognizes individuals who express creativity through the

visual arts while possessing significant emotional or mental health challenges.

A native of Los Angeles, Calif., and a Veteran of the Navy, Coast Guard and California National Guard, Merrick has suffered post traumatic stress disorder from images left behind from service. While stationed in Da Nang in 1972, Merrick witnessed the execution of a young Vietnamese sailor who had fallen asleep on his watch; and watched the recovery of a drowned shipmate’s body in Japan.

“I felt worse after writing down my experiences and re-living those moments, but once I started working with my hands I felt much better,” Merrick said. “I found a therapy that was just right for me.”



*By Angela Taylor*

*Visual Information Specialist*

*Indianapolis VA Medical Center*

## Artists and Performers

Please check with your team leader and/or the posted schedule in the Ballroom Foyer for any changes or updates to your daily schedule.



## Performers

- 8:30 - 10:30 a.m. **BRUNCH:** Salons 1 - 5
- 8:30 a.m. **INTERDENOMINATIONAL SERVICE**  
Salons 6 & 7
- 10 a.m. **TEAM LEADER AND TEAM SUPPORT MEETING**  
Dorothy Quincy Ballrooms ABC
- 10:45 a.m. **TEAM LEADER AND TEAM SUPPORT MEETING**  
with Performers
- 11:15 a.m. **PERFORMERS AND SHOW STAFF LOAD BUSES AND DEPART FOR**  
Cutler Majestic Theatre
- 12 - 1:40 p.m. **PERFORMERS INTO COSTUME AND MAKEUP**
- 1:40 p.m. **ALL PERFORMERS MEET FOR WARM-UP AND PEP TALK**  
Location to be Determined
- 1:50 p.m. **ALL PERFORMERS ON STAGE**
- 2 - 5 p.m. **STAGE SHOW PERFORMANCE**  
Cutler Majestic Theatre
- 5 p.m. **BUSES BEGIN DEPARTING FOR THE QUINCY MARRIOTT**
- 7 p.m. **CLOSING CELEBRATION BANQUET & CEREMONIES:**  
President's Ballroom, Salons 1 - 5
- 9 p.m. **KARAOKE:**  
Dorothy Quincy Ballrooms ABC

## Artists

- 8:30 - 10:30 a.m. **BRUNCH:** Salon 1-5
- 8:30 a.m. **INTERDENOMINATIONAL SERVICE**  
Salons 6 & 7
- 10 a.m. **TEAM LEADER AND TEAM SUPPORT MEETING**  
Dorothy Quincy Ballrooms ABC
- 11 a.m. **TEAM LEADER AND TEAM SUPPORT MEETING**  
with Artists
- 12:15 p.m. **ARTISTS, ART STAFF, FAMILY AND FRIENDS, SPONSORS, AND VOLUNTEERS LOAD BUSES**  
Depart for Cutler Majestic Theatre
- 2 - 5 p.m. **STAGE SHOW PERFORMANCE**  
Cutler Majestic Theatre
- 5 p.m. **BUSES BEGIN DEPARTING FOR QUINCY MARRIOTT**
- 7 p.m. **CLOSING CELEBRATION BANQUET & CEREMONIES:**  
President's Ballroom, Salons 1 - 5
- 9 p.m. **KARAOKE:**  
Dorothy Quincy Ballrooms ABC







FOR MORE INFORMATION ON UPCOMING SPECIAL EVENTS VISIT [WWW.VA.GOV/ADAPTIVESPORTS](http://WWW.VA.GOV/ADAPTIVESPORTS)

# Glasswork Heals the Soul



Getting into the zone is easy for Army Veteran Greg Snyder who received first place in glasswork for his artwork "Peacock Lamp Shade."

"I head to my basement, turn on my music and before I know it, two to three hours have gone by quickly as I cut, grind, mold and foil stained glass into lampshades, jewelry boxes and windows," Snyder said.

Dealing with life struggles over the years, Snyder has found glasswork very therapeutic and healing. His passion not only has created beautiful pieces of art, but also has enabled him to get out of the house and meet people. Snyder has enjoyed attending art classes and going to studios where he interacts with other artists and enhances his skills.

**"Doing something with my hands helps me escape and creating art has made a big difference in my life," Snyder said.**

He learned about the Festival from seeing a poster at the Spokane VA Medical Center and with the assistance of Prosthetics Service submitted his work.

His enthusiasm for glasswork is contagious as he describes the process. "Pick one thing and do it well, is what I say. Creating art makes me feel complete and gives me purpose," he said.

**"It's gratifying and I'm glad for the opportunity to be at the Festival."**

*By Angela Taylor  
Visual Information Specialist  
Indianapolis VA Medical Center*

# FROM DESPAIR TO HOPE

## ArtHeals

Jim Stevens' life reads like a book and sounds like a movie. He is a former Army long-range reconnaissance patrolman who suffered two injuries in Vietnam. He was a husband, then a single father, a self-taught chemist, college professor and a published author; and he is the only blind man to win the tournament of champions martial arts fighting competition.

Most of all, Stevens is an artist. His work includes drawing, sculpting and scrimshaw - the oldest art form native to North America.

Stevens is also an author and a teacher. One day while grading papers, he got a migraine headache, which wasn't unusual, but this one quickly grew severe. He fell asleep to manage the pain, but when he woke 30 minutes later, he was blind. The prognosis was bleak.

As it turned out, bullet fragments in Stevens' head from 20 years earlier in Vietnam aggravated the migraine and he suffered a stroke. The news left him upset and angry.

Stevens knew how enjoyable art can be, but he hadn't considered its therapeutic value. He never thought of it as a form of treatment. After his unexpected blindness, he gave up his artistry.

A VA blind rehabilitation specialist taught Stevens how to care for himself and his two children. The journey ahead would not be easy. He constantly broke things and repeatedly gave up. He felt hopeless.

Stevens' youngest daughter Megghan witnessed his frustration and anger every day. It was her sweet voice and innocent pleas, along with the advice of a VA recreation therapist, that urged him to pick his art back up. It was a decision he would not regret.

Over the course of two years, he slowly regained the quality of his work. For the next eight years he labored, sold some of his work and eventually entered local VA creative arts competitions. His first win came in 2010 when he won first place in two categories. In 2012, he entered the competition again. His perseverance and determination garnered him a win in the special recognition-physical disability category.

His work can be found in galleries and collections in the United States, Canada, Europe, South Africa and Russia. His client list ranges from private collectors to colleges and museums. In 2010, the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts recognized Stevens through the VSA registry list in visual and literary art. He is one of 1,700 artists designated with the honor from the international organization on arts and disability.

Stevens thanks his martial arts instructor, his daughter



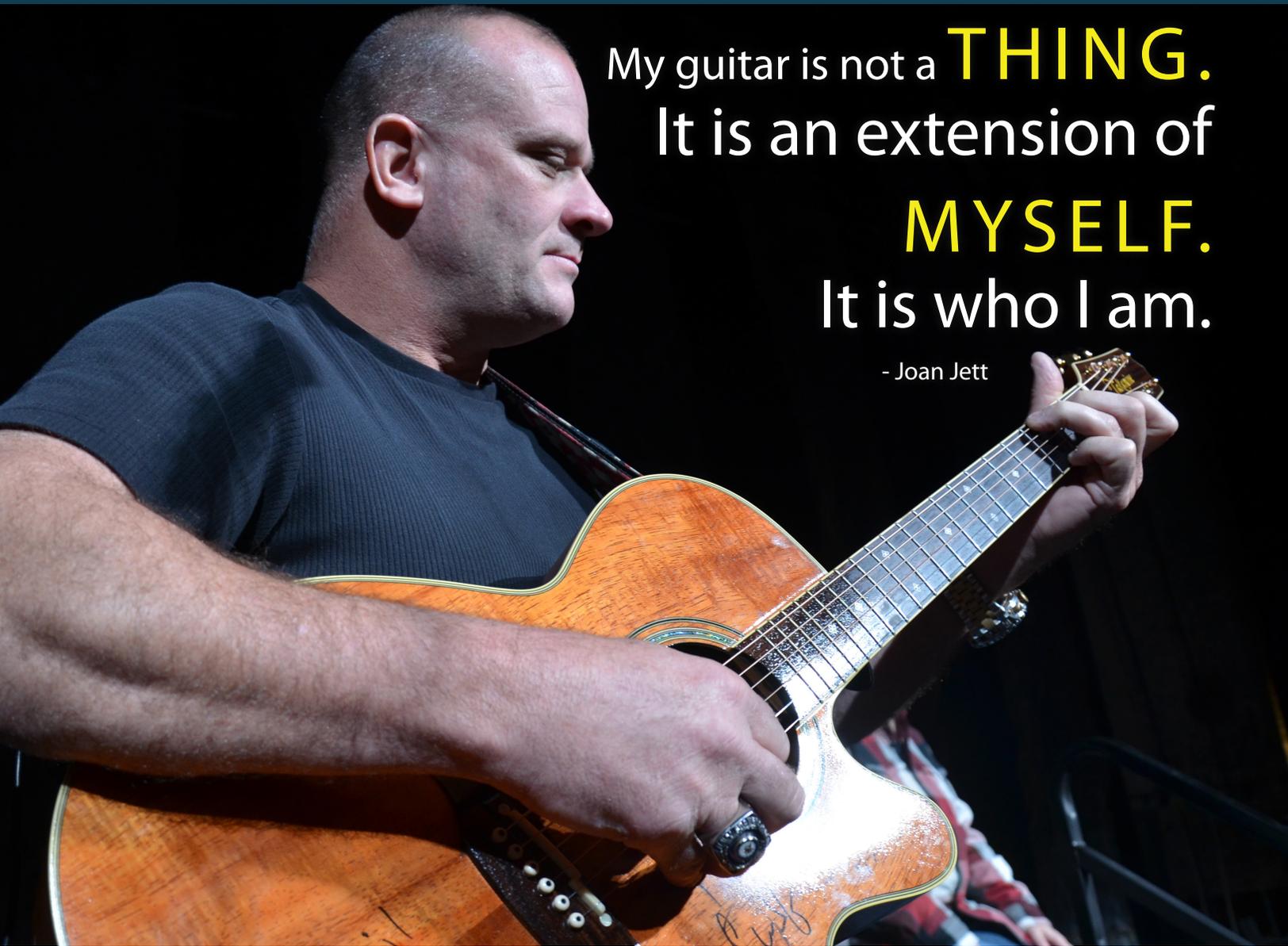
Megghan and his VA recreation therapist for urging him to never give up.

From despair to hope, frustration to freedom, Stevens looks back on what his life once was like learning he was blind. Today he's happy, he says. He's at peace.

**“I'll never give up on art again,” he said. “It's the one thing in my life that keeps me going.”**

*By Erikka D. Neroes  
Writer / Editor*

*VA North Texas Health Care System*



My guitar is not a **THING**.  
It is an extension of  
**MYSELF**.  
It is who I am.

- Joan Jett

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