

Combat Paper NJ Helps Local Veterans Share Their Stories by Transforming Uniforms into Art

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Galloway Township, NJ- Student veterans at The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey cut their military uniforms into pieces to release the stories held within the fabric by converting the strips of cloth into handmade paper.

Combat Paper NJ, a program of the Printmaking Center of New Jersey, hosted a workshop for veterans on the college's campus Nov. 12 -15. David Keefe of Montclair, director of Combat Paper NJ, co-led the workshop with instructor Eli Wright of East Stroudsburg, PA.

Earlier generations of veterans often gather at American Legion chapters to share stories. The men and women who are returning from Iraq and Afghanistan have different ways of gathering, explained Keefe. "There are all sorts of ways veterans are coming together," he said, listing various outdoor activities, writing and art as examples.

The first step is probably the hardest. "It's an emotional process cutting up the uniform," said Patrick Cavicchio of Bayville, a junior Accounting major who is an Army veteran.

Elton Link of Manahawkin, a senior Pre-Engineering major, brought his Navy uniform to the workshop. "My wife had to dig it out," he said.

He has many uniforms, but the one he picked to turn into paper "meant more." "It's one of the only uniforms I have left of that era," Link said.

The solid green-colored uniform, nicknamed a pickle suit, is the one he wore when he was deployed for Operation Desert Storm and Operation Desert Shield. Today's uniforms have digital, woodland and desert camouflage. The pickle suits are "extinct" and only seen in the movies now Link said.

After the uniforms are cut up, the strips of fabric are tossed into a paper beater, a machine that mixes the cloth with water and churns it into pulp.

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The water in the paper beater fills with suds as the detergent and dirt particles are freed from the fabric. Next the pulp is put into a container of fresh water and a mold is placed into the mixture to compress the pulp into a sheet that is then dried.

“The transformation can be therapeutic,” but there is more to it than that, said Keefe. The veterans become part of a community and there is a comfort level that’s built allowing them to share stories that they don’t usually talk about.

“It’s my first time doing something like this. It’s an interesting and eye-opening experience,” said Cavicchio, adding that he got to do it with people he’s known for three years.

They talked about the places they had been in Iraq and had the chance to understand each other’s military backgrounds Cavicchio explained.

“It can be intimidating. It’s not the easiest thing to do,” Keefe said.

The later steps in the process allow the veterans to express their stories through silk-screen designs and written passages.

Instructor Eli Wright said, “Sometimes people aren’t quite ready to let go of their uniform yet.”

He encourages them to save a pocket so that it can be embedded into the paper “while still transforming the uniform into something new.”

About 15 student veterans went through the process. “It was a great turnout for a college campus,” Wright said.

“Stockton has a great SVO,” Keefe added.

The final paper creations will be displayed during the Stockton@Peace lecture and panel discussion by David Keefe and a panel of Stockton experts at the college on Tuesday, Nov. 19, 4:30-6 p.m., in F-Wing room F-111. The free lecture is open to the public and is sponsored by the Stockton Center for Community Engagement and the U.S. Institute of Peace.

“If it weren’t for Tom and Martha, we wouldn’t be doing this. They make it so much easier to transition here,” said Link.

Tom O’Donnell is assistant dean of Students/Veteran Affairs/Leadership and Martha McGinnis is coordinator of Veteran Affairs.

Keefe says he’s always been an artist. After the September 11, 2001 attacks, he enlisted to become a United States Marine, earning the rank of sergeant and completing a tour of combat duty in Iraq. He became an adjunct art and painting instructor at Montclair State University after his military service. Wright, who served as an Army medic in Iraq, has been making paper since 2007 after learning the process from Combat Paper founder Drew Cameron.

Combat Paper NJ began when the Printmaking Center of New Jersey contacted Keefe to help get the initiative up and running. He partnered with Wright.

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Over the past two and a half years, Combat Paper NJ has brought workshops to veterans on campuses, at veteran organizations, in hospitals, including Walter Reed National Military Medical Center and Fort Belvoir Community Hospital, and even on the streets.

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