

“A Veteran's Drumming Circle”

The Scuttlebutt

Unifying the Veteran Community

Volume 1, No. 5, December 2015

(serving Veterans in Harris and surrounding Counties)

Written by: Luz Rebollar



For some veterans, Monday night is exciting for a reason other than football. This is when they join other veterans for a jam session. Whether it is to let out frustrations or to release their inner musician, these veterans enjoy coming to the free drumming lessons provided by Hope Stone. Founded in 1997 by its current President & CEO, Jane Weiner, Hope Stone conveys the intrinsic value of the arts through education programs tailored to suit the needs of specific populations of children and adults. Weiner wanted to offer free lessons to veterans but did not have an adequate venue. In the spring of this year, she partnered with Oskar Gonzalez, (USMC OIF veteran and Outreach Coordinator for US Vets), and both agreed that US Vets’ Midtown Terrace location would be ideal. It is centralized, allowing veterans around the city easy access to the facility.

Loud noises are uncomfortable and startle veterans who suffer from PTSD. The organizers hope that drumming can help these combat veterans become more comfortable in noisy environments. From a distance it may sound like a bunch of loud noise, but up close it actually sounds like music. These drums are not your typical drum set. They are instruments used in Brazilian Samba and West African beats. For many veterans, this is their first experience with these exotic instruments. Beats range from West Africa, Cuban, Brazil, Yoruban, and Malinke.

Percussionist Chris Howard leads the group that ranges from ten to twenty veterans. He begins the session with self-introductions and re-capping previous lessons. Hope Stone provides over twenty different instruments and veterans choose whichever they feel comfortable with. Some are drawn to the bendir, a drum that has been around since prehistoric times. Others opt for a snare drum, the djembe, (a rope-tuned skin-covered goblet drum), a tambourine, or the Brazilian ganza, a rattle filled with beads. Some instruments take the lead. Others play a supporting role providing a rhythm underneath the rest of the band.

Howard has been teaching young and old the art of drumming for fifteen years. He says the veteran community is one of the easiest groups to work with. “Typically people (strangers) don’t play well together, but veterans know how to stick to a part and they know how to play a supportive role,” he says. Maybe it comes from the drilling and the way veterans know how to follow instructions. Whatever the reason is doesn’t matter; Howard enjoys working with veterans. He has always enjoyed drums and their therapeutic process so anytime he can share that joy, he’s happy to. Drumming can be intimidating, especially for an amateur but Howard’s patience and kindness make everyone feel at ease.

Army veteran Ty Mitchell admits to coming to the session not so much for the interest in drumming, but for the experience. He is willing to try anything at least once. He’d even jump out of

a plane if given the chance, he says smiling. It was his first lesson and although he couldn't quite find his rhythm, he's glad he came.

Jose Velasquez, (Army), has always been interested in music so when he heard about the lessons he was excited about it. He expected the traditional drums but was surprised to find it was a different style of drumming. He came to two classes then got hooked. He is a regular on Monday nights.

Weiner's inspiration to help veterans through music comes from her family's service to our country. Her brother, Dr. Timothy Weiner, is a pediatric surgeon who joined the Navy and was deployed to Afghanistan. Her brother-in-law, Lt Col Chris Mallory, retired from the Air Force after twenty years and is currently attending Rice University through the Yellow Ribbon program. She provides these lessons to veterans in their honor.

November 23rd was the last lesson of 2015. It ended with Gonzalez leading the group in a moving Native American cry. Originally written by Daughters of the Earth, the song was originally dedicated to the First Nations' Warriors. It has since been adapted to honor the 507th Military Police Battalion, along with other military units. Gonzalez is part of the Karankawa tribe of Native Americans, now a tribal group, who played a pivotal part in early Texas history.

Classes will resume early next year. The hour-long lessons are free. The Scuttlebutt will keep you posted. Maybe one day Hope Stone will have a performing veteran band, possibly playing at Veterans Day parades, and other veteran events in the community. Come join the fun! All veterans are welcomed.