

Play dramatizes stories of veterans' mental health issues

By **Bruce Ingram**
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Many military veterans return to civilian life with major mental health problems, an unfortunate fact the theater company Erasing the Distance is bringing to dramatic life.

"Veterans Voices," the company's second production devoted to the issue, will be performed May 29 at Gorton Community Center in Lake Forest. The fundraiser benefits Lake County Veterans and Family Services Foundation.

"Post-traumatic stress disorder is a major factor in the difficulties these veterans face, for sure," said Erasing the Distance founder/artistic director Brigid O'Shaughnessy. "But depression is also part of it, and addiction.

"One of the vets in our show talks about not even realizing he had PTSD for 30 years after coming back from Vietnam, and using substances as a way to cope with flashbacks and nightmares."

For the past 10 years, Erasing the Distance has specialized in dramatizing the struggles of people contending with a wide range of mental illnesses, from depression to schizophrenia to eating disorders. Two years ago, however, in response to audience requests, the company staged its first "Veterans Voices" production. It went so well O'Shaughnessy decided to stage another as part of the 10th anniversary season.

As usual for Erasing the Distance, the show makes use of the actual experiences of real people. Interviewers gathered the stories of five veterans, all of them afflicted by traumatic experiences during their service. One, a former president of Sears, was finally overwhelmed by PTSD during retirement. Another, a young woman whose unit lost 26 soldiers during deployment in Iraq, came home punching holes in walls.

In each case, lengthy reminiscences have been edited down to roughly 10-minute testimonies, though not as much as a single word has been changed. The resulting monologues are performed by professional actors.

When O'Shaughnessy first became involved in this work as a volunteer at Thresholds mental health center in Chicago, the storytellers themselves appeared on stage. That sometimes triggered adverse reactions in the performers and often had a distancing effect on audiences.

"At Thresholds, you could sometimes see the discomfort of the performers and that created a disconnect between the audience and the story," O'Shaughnessy said. "They were being taken out of the experience by the distractions of the performance.

"That's why we started using professional actors with Erasing the Distance. With good actors, people get swept up in what they're seeing and they realize, 'Oh, my God. I've felt that myself. I've thought that before. I've experienced it.'"

Another benefit emerged when using actors: the storytellers could see their experiences from the outside.

"I've had people say, 'Oh my gosh, I had no idea of the seriousness of what I've been through until I saw this,'" O'Shaughnessy said. "I had no idea how strong I was until I saw myself mirrored back."

Bruce Ingram is a freelance reporter.

'Veterans Voices'

Gorton Community Center, 400 E. Illinois Road, Lake Forest

7 p.m. May 29

\$25 in advance, \$30 at the door

(847) 234-6060 or visit <http://www.lakevetsfound.org>

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