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By **Peggy McGlone/The StarLedger**



*John O'Boyle/The Star-Ledger*  
Tom Hankerson of Levittown, PA listens to drum circle instructor Richard Reiter during a program called "Voices of Valor" that helps returning vets relieve and manage stress through music and songwriting. The program takes place inside the Rutgers student center in New Brunswick.

**NEW BRUNSWICK** —Their musical tastes range from the Kinks to Betty Carter, from a familiar gospel song to a rare single by Smokey Robinson. Their vocal abilities are varied, too, and so is their formal music education.

But none of that matters because the students of a weekly music class under way in New Brunswick share one critical bond: They are all military veterans who are learning how music can help them adapt to civilian life.

The course is called "Voices of Valor" and for the next two months, a team of musicians and psychology graduate students will work with the vets to create an original song. They will drum together, as they did at the first class last month, and will share their favorite songs, often singing them as they discover their musical talents.

Most importantly, they will blend their personal stories into a collective song that they will perform and record.

Brian Dallow said the program builds on the concept that writing down the things that cause stress help a person to deal with them better.

"How do we relate that to music, to writing lyrics to songs?" Dallow asked. "We want to use music in a conscious and creative way, to use it as a stress reducer, to address the re-integration into civilian life."

"Voices of Valor" is the latest effort of Music For All Seasons, a nonprofit corporation based in Scotch Plains and dedicated to the therapeutic properties of music. Since 1991, Music For All Seasons has presented more than 3,000 live concerts in nursing homes, homeless shelters, hospitals, rehabilitation centers and prisons in New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, Pennsylvania and California.



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Adria Hall of Lyons participates in a drum circle.

Husband and wife leaders Dallow and Rena Fruchter have worked with victims of domestic violence, showing women and their children how music can relieve stress and calm anxiety. That program received a prestigious grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.

The same approach is behind this program for returning veterans. "Voices of Valor" began with a pilot class this summer and will continue with 14 more 8-week sessions through April 2012. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation in Princeton is underwriting the program, so there is no cost to the veterans who participate. The program aims to reduce stress, control depression and provide

group support in a safe and non-judgmental environment. "It allows you to express yourself in a way you don't usually," retired Marine Jonathan Mendoza said. "I surprised myself."

Mendoza, 29, of Piscataway, completed the "Voices" pilot session this summer. Although he was skeptical at first, he said he found the program helpful because it builds on the special bond veterans have with each other. "It allows you to feel more comfortable, because they understand what you go through. They may have the same problem that relates to exactly what you're expressing. They have another way of dealing with it, or they have coped with it and they understand how to deal with it," said Mendoza, who served four years in the military, including two deployments in Iraq and one in Afghanistan. "Everyone kind of shares and relates." Mendoza said music is a lifeline for many soldiers who often listen to songs that remind them of home, of spouses and other family members, of friends.

"Sometimes that's all they have that allows them to keep going," Mendoza said. "It allows them to forget about what's going on around them, allows them to cope with life. And it helps with re-adapting to society, it allows you to find a comfortable place." In the spring, Mendoza and his colleagues wrote and recorded "Time Out," a jazzy piece that has a hip-hop flavor, thanks to the repeated "I just need a time out" chorus. Musician and teacher Lou Watson played the recording for the group. The sax solo was performed by fellow teacher Richard Reiter, Mendoza provided some vocals, and Rutgers psychology graduate student Paul Blimling played his cello.

Clyde Scott, 26, who returned from active duty last year, was excited to begin the song-writing process. A bassist who used to be in a band, Scott said he was looking forward to "exploring new avenues of music." "I really liked it," he said of the first session. "The group was good. The cohesiveness was strong. If we wanted to put a song together, we could figure something out."



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*Music instructor Richard Reiter (standing) leads a drum circle during a program called "Voices of Valor" that helps returning vets relieve and manage stress through music and songwriting.*

Although originally intended for recently returning veterans, the program has welcomed all veterans who have expressed an interest, Fruchter said. "We are in the early stages and we have the space. We don't want to turn anyone away," she said. "And we learned they have the same issues ... whether they returned this year or 7 or 8 or 10 years ago."

Retired Army Col. Stephen Abel, director of student veteran services at Rutgers, welcomes the program into the mix. "Programs that help veterans adjust from their combat experiences are all good, and for veterans to be able to choose from a menu of things that could potentially help them is best," he said. "Especially for guys and gals coming back with invisible wounds .. a program that would allow them to heal, in the kind of non-threatening way that "Voices" does, is good."

"Voices of Valor" does not require musical experience of any kind, Fruchter said. And the program emphasizes the confidentiality of its participants. That was important to us and to them," she said. "Once they know the leaders and know no one is judgmental or critical, it's just a question of being able to share, and then to go that step further and be creative with it."

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