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## New book expands access to arts-based wellness for U.S. veterans across the world

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When Todd Burkhardt retired from the military in 2019, he found himself struggling with the transition to civilian life. He had served for more than 27 years active duty in the U.S. Army as an infantry officer, and after that, as the director of IU's Army ROTC program.

"For me, it was hard; there was a loss of identity, loss of purpose, a loss of team," said Burkhardt, who after the military had transitioned to his current job as director of campus partnerships for the Center for Rural Engagement with IU. "I had an amazing new job, I worked with great faculty, staff and students, but I felt like I didn't fit in, and I struggled with the transition out of three decades of military service."



Veterans and service members take part in an arts-based wellness exercises during a Creative Arts for Veterans program.

Shortly after starting with the [Center for Rural Engagement](#), Burkhardt and his colleagues attended a wellness experience and open-studio time with Lauren Daugherty, arts-based wellness experience manager at the IU Eskenazi Museum of Art.

"It was wonderful," Burkhardt said. "You could say I was drawn to it, pun intended. Through art, there's a mindfulness, an intentionality — a way to express my feelings through non-verbal means. As veterans, we can be stoic when it comes to expressing well-being, fear, uncertainty or even addressing mental health. I realized this could help me in my transition and journey, and I realized if this is helping me, it could help other veterans out there, as well."

Thus was born [Creative Arts for Vets](#), a program that started in 2019 to bring various free arts and arts-based wellness exercises to veterans and service members in counties across Indiana. Today, that program has expanded to include a new book that is reaching veterans and service members across the globe.

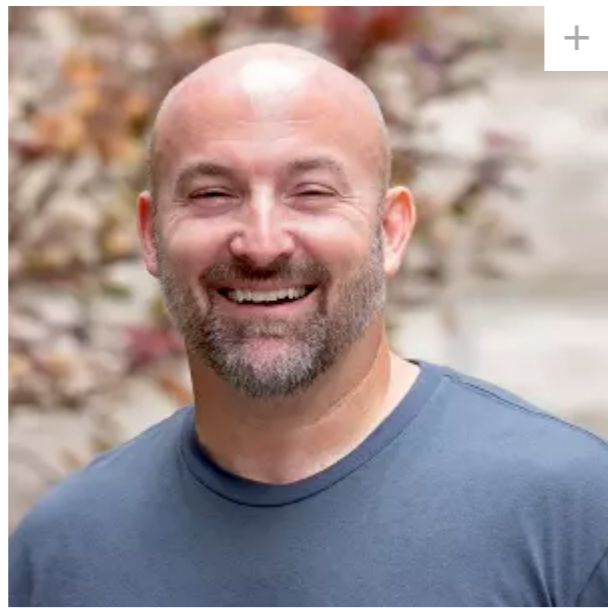
"The whole basis of art therapy and arts-based wellness is that we find meaning and relaxation and well-being from making things," Daugherty said. "Art therapists see art as a healing modality. A lot of times you can get things out of your brain — out of your body — through images you don't feel comfortable saying with words, or that you're not even aware of. Artmaking can even pull things forward you weren't cognitively aware of."

### Broadening the scope

Burkhardt worked with a multidisciplinary team to design and write "The CAV Book" to increase access and availability of the Creative Arts for Veterans' arts-based wellness exercises.

"During several of these programs with veterans, they asked us when we were coming back for another session in their particular county," Burkhardt said. "We realized there was a bigger need. Could there be a 'take-home' version of our classes? This could be a bridge for their treatment, a bridge between sessions and just a way to reach more veterans."

In addition to Burkhardt and Daugherty, the team included John Keesler, associate professor in the School of Social Work, and two graduate students: Irina Watkins, who is pursuing her master's in social work at IU Bloomington, and Brooke Neubaum, who is studying art therapy and mental



Todd Burkhardt.

+ health counseling at the Herron School of Art and Design at IUPUI. Jeni Waters, media specialist at the Center for Rural Engagement, designed the book's layout.

"One of us alone could not have done this," Keesler said. "This was true interprofessional work, and to have the opportunity to pull everyone's strengths together created a really thoughtful product."

The CAV Book includes psychoeducation pieces and veteran narratives, written by Watkins, and art-based wellness directives and exercises, written by Neubaum.

"Psychoeducation is making information regarding mental health and well-being accessible to your particular audience," Keesler said. "In the book, we talk about things like survivor's guilt, trauma, moral injury, grief and loss. We give a name to each of those issues, and we identify and describe them in ways that are easy to digest. If you can put a name to something you're experiencing, you can perhaps better understand it and realize you're not the only one going through this."

Watkins is also a military spouse, whose husband just retired from the Army after 20 years of service.

"I was also able to shed more light on the needs of the veteran community with my personal experiences," Watkins said. "I've not only lived as a military spouse over the past two decades, I've also worked with veterans through service organizations and through volunteering at VA hospitals."

"I've seen that it's hard for veterans to talk about what they're going through with people who can't relate," she added. "They do have this loss of community when they leave the service; they may have combat-related trauma, complex trauma, survivor's guilt, PTSD. Sometimes there are no words that can express your emotions and your trauma, so art-based activities are a wonderful way to process those things."

"As I worked through some of the exercises myself in the book, it was such a revelation. It was an amazing example and proof for me of how powerful something like this can be."

Neubaum, a master's student in the Herron School, also has an internship this year working with veterans.

"I was able to use the theory I've learned in counseling and art therapy courses to write up the art directives throughout the book," Neubaum said. "Irina and I met up every week to make sure our goals were aligning, and then we'd get together as well with the faculty so they could propose edits, and the process continued like that until the book was complete."

"To see everything come together from the initial stages of bullet points and Post-It notes to the final product was really gratifying. It was also cool to collaborate with people outside of my field. The multidisciplinary approach took communication and compromise, but I learned a lot about those fields through the process, as well."



## A remarkable response

"We wanted to break down as many barriers as possible with this book," Burkhardt said.

"It's free to veterans, those currently serving and deployed, spouses of veterans and service-providers who work with the veteran population, and it's very private," he said. "You don't need to get a ride to an event, or even show up. You can use it in your house, in a homeless shelter, if you're incarcerated, on the road, traveling."

"We also include an art kit with the book, which makes a huge difference," Daugherty said. "When the veteran receives this book, there's no need to do anything else; everything is right there for them. It breaks down just another barrier this population has."



+ In just the first few weeks since the book was published in February, the response has been huge. So far, they've had requests from 21 states, as well as from service members serving overseas in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere. They've also had requests from service providers, veteran treatment courts, and fire and paramedicine departments. Daugherty has been in contact with other art therapists across the country who are looking to use the book in

their therapy sessions.

"One veteran told me that his friend and he typically meet at a coffee shop to talk, and this book gives them an avenue to talk about things they normally wouldn't have before," Burkhardt said. "They said they never would have talked about suicide or PTSD or moral injury; the book gives them a way to approach those topics."

The project so far has received grants and funding from the Indiana Department of Health, Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 1587 and the IU Center for Rural Engagement.

"Veterans and those currently serving have the highest rate of suicide nationally; 17 to 22 veterans die a day by suicide in our country," Burkhardt said. "Indiana is ranked 16th in terms of veteran population; we have just over 400,000 veterans in Indiana. Hopefully this book can help our veteran community both here in the state and around the globe.

"I'm thrilled with the response thus far. There is such a need, and I think this is one thing, in addition to a lot of things, that can help veterans and service members to support their mental health and well-being through the rigors and stress that life has given us."

## Author

IU Newsroom

**Teresa Mackin**

Communications Consultant, Strategic Communications

P: [317-274-5432](tel:317-274-5432)

E: [tmackin@iu.edu](mailto:tmackin@iu.edu)

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