

THE MAGAZINE OF MILITARY HOUSING, LODGING & LIFESTYLES

DEFENSE COMMUNITIES

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2012

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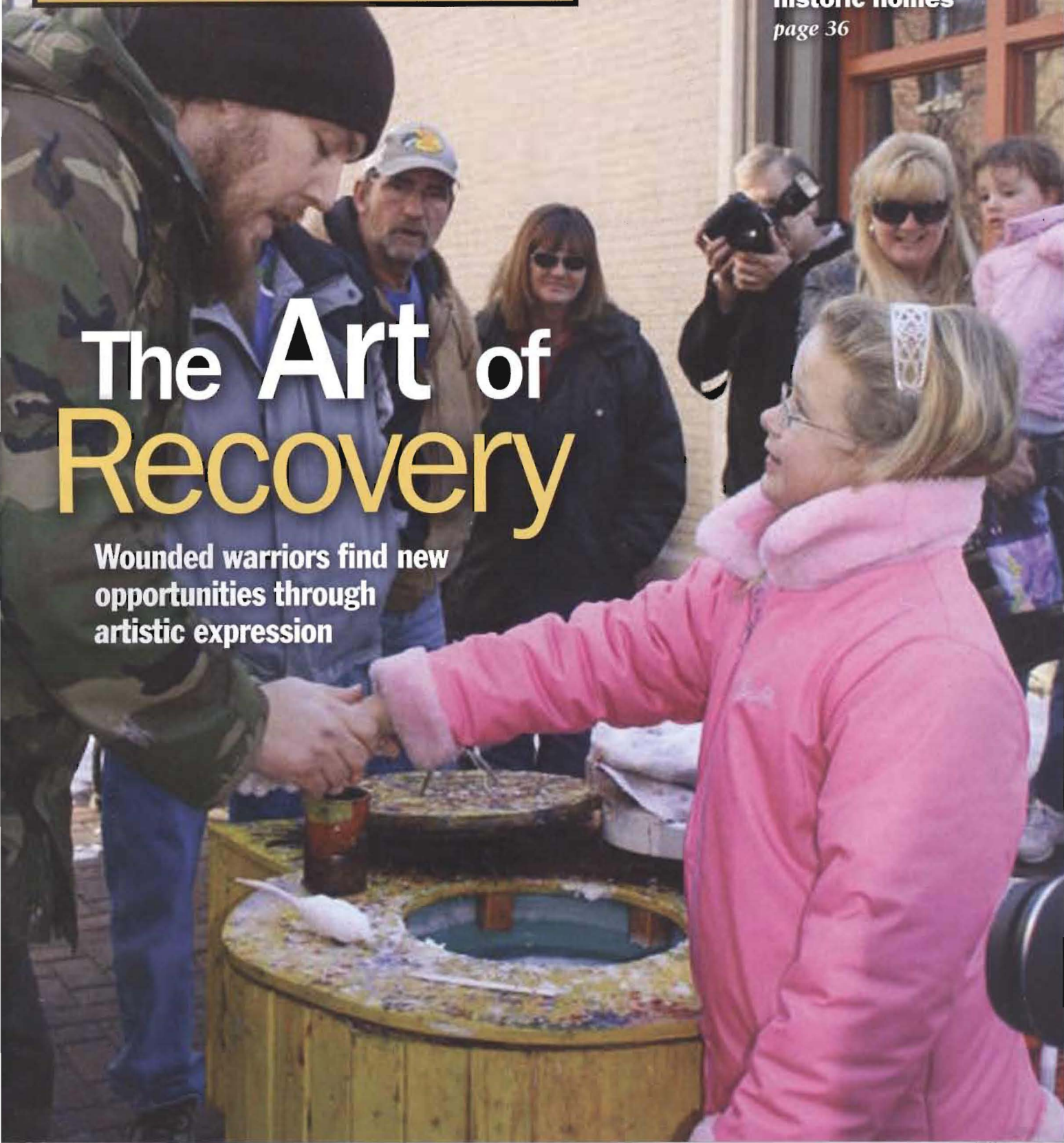
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The Art of Recovery

Wounded warriors find new
opportunities through
artistic expression



The Art of Recovery

A new program gives wounded vets a way to express themselves

By JoAnne Castagna, Ed.D.

Heather Miller of Saint Charles, Missouri, remembers a horrific day: Oct. 20, 2009.

"My husband Greg sent me a text message telling me he was going to take his life and that he [would] send me a message with the location of his body."

Luckily, she found him hours later safely in a hospital bed. Greg Miller suffers from severe post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and this was one of several suicide attempts he had made after his last deployment to Kirkuk, Iraq, in 2008.

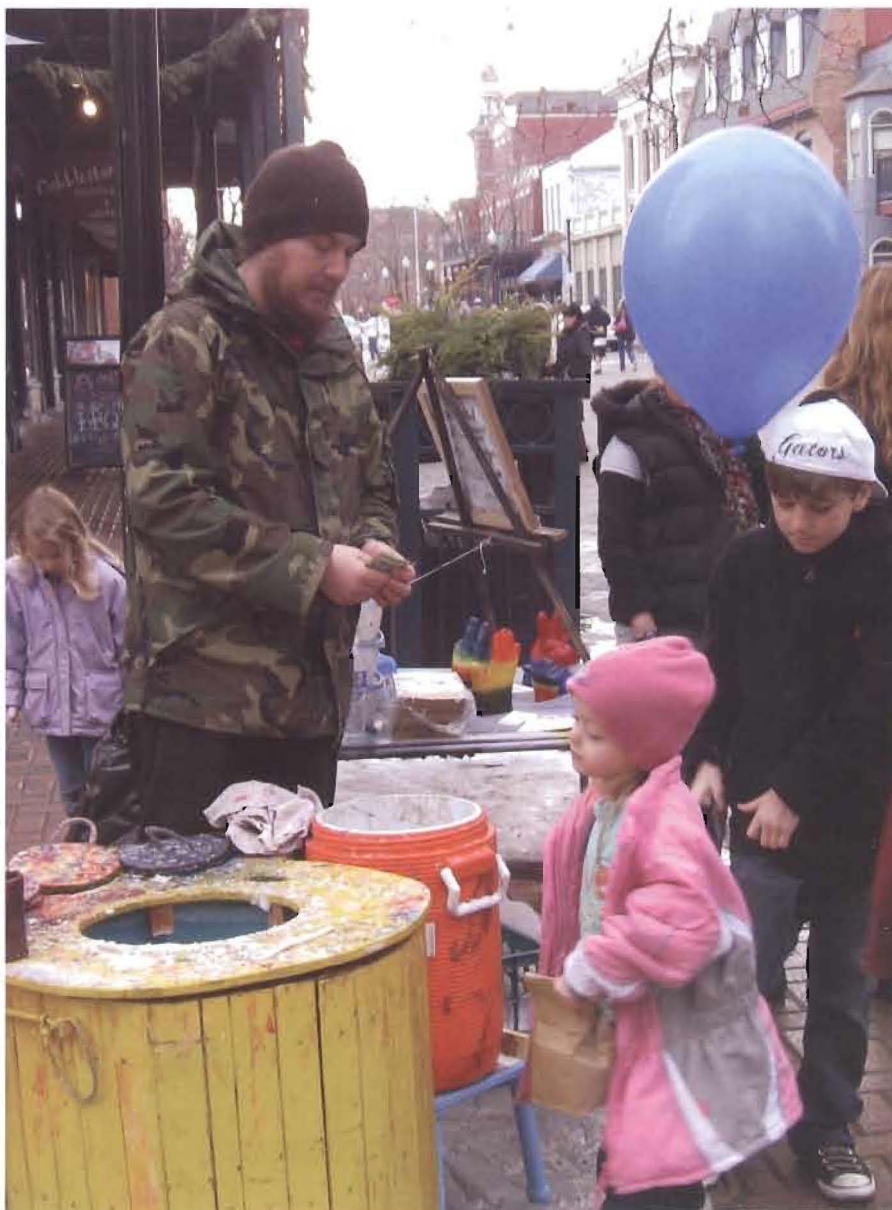
Today, Miller is a retired Staff Sergeant with the U.S. Air Force and on the road to recovery. He and his wife attribute this in large part to his love of art.

"His talents and ability to complete art projects have literally saved his life," said Heather. "It also makes Greg feel good to finally have his passion for art-work get noticed."

Healing the soul

One of Miller's works of art will be displayed in the new Department of Defense (DoD) administrative office complex in Alexandria, Virginia, as part of a program called Spirit of Wounded Warriors and Veterans: Healing the Soul Through Artistic Expression.

"This program is a way for us to thank our wounded veterans for their service and provide them a venue to display their artwork. The occupants of the complex will also benefit by being able



to view the works of art," said Joanne Hensley, Chief, Project Development, BRAC 133. Hensley created the program in cooperation with personnel from other federal agencies.

Hensley and her team announced the program by distributing a flyer to veterans groups and hospitals. They received artworks ranging from paintings to photographs and sculptures to quilts from Hawaii, New Mexico, Massachusetts, Illinois, and elsewhere. Submissions came from veterans who had served in the Vietnam and Gulf Wars as well as Iraq. Two dozen pieces were selected to be displayed.

Miller's artwork was one of them. Miller spray-painted a mountain landscape showing a lake at the foot of the mountains and a moon in the sky with the American flag as a backdrop. "I'm still very patriotic. I love my country and that we are free, and this is what I wanted to portray in this work of art," he said. "We live in a beautiful part of the world."

Another veteran whose artwork was selected for display is Andrew Bourne. Like Miller, Bourne suffers from PTSD and brain injuries after serving in the Gulf War in the 1990s and more recently in Husaybah, Iraq, for the Marine Corps.

Bourne, a retired Staff Sergeant who is in the process of moving to New York with his family, submitted a giclée, a fine art digital print made on an ink-jet printer. Titled "The American Rocker," the image shows a guitar player caught up in his music. "You look at this picture and it says America," said Bourne. "It takes you back. I'm in my mid-40s, and I look at it and it means Jimmy Page, Led Zeppelin, the heyday of early rock-and-roll. It says different things to different people."

Miller and Bourne both heard about the program through their recovery care coordinators, who also encouraged them to use art as a form of therapy. And both agree that artwork is a good outlet for wounded veterans. As Miller said, "When I'm doing my artwork I go into a different zone. I can tune everything out and focus on my art. It's kind of a getaway."

For Bourne, "Creating art has been a family-saver. It keeps my wife and I



close," he said. "It's a way for me to get my brain to relax more, get it to refocus, and learn how to think."

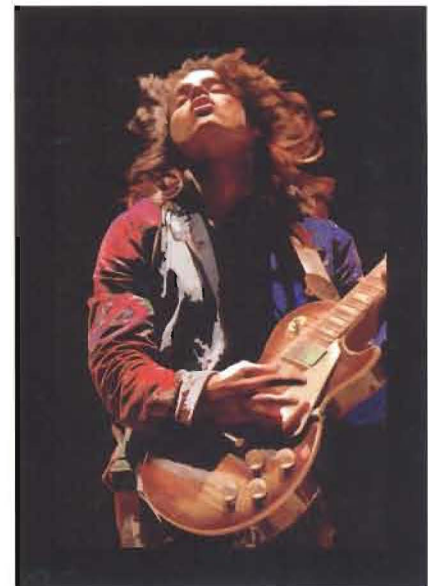
Building a career

For both men, their confidence in their art has even grown into full-time careers. Miller has always enjoyed artwork, and after getting out of the service he and his wife started their own interactive art studio called My Handyworks, which provides art classes and art camps for children.

Bourne and his wife are also starting their own company, Epic Artwork & Photos. "This whole thing went from my therapy just to get my brain going and sort of as a distraction all the way to its own career," he said.

The agencies involved with the construction of the DoD complex, in collaboration with the Fisher House Foundation, an international nonprofit organization that provides assistance to families of critically injured servicemen and -women, are planning a formal ceremony to showcase the artwork and introduce the artists. All of the artwork from the Spirit of Wounded Warriors and Veterans program will be displayed on the first two floors of the BRAC 133 office complex, which sits on a 16-acre campus at the Mark Center in Alexandria, Virginia. The building was built as part of the 2005 Base Closure and Realignment Act and was constructed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, New York District. The complex opened in the fall of 2011.

Both Bourne and Miller are honored that their artwork was selected and



(Above) Artwork courtesy Greg Miller; (below) "The American Rocker" by Andrew Bourne.

believe the program is good for disabled veterans. "It gives individuals who may not necessarily have all of their confidence levels the opportunity to rebuild," Bourne said. "This is one of those things that can help." ■

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This article was previously posted to the Army Corps of Engineers website.