

Writing a Story of Community

Understanding the importance of community and camaraderie is one of the main reasons Lopez is honored to work for and be a member of the VFW

Apr 30, 2021

Nick Lopez served in the U.S. Marine Corps for eight years. He's now living in Missouri and **#StillServing** as youth programs and community service coordinator at VFW National Headquarters and director of the Kansas City Veterans Writing Team (KCVWT).

KCVWT holds biannual writing workshops and monthly critique groups for veterans and their family members. Lopez began participating in events in fall 2017 and has remained involved ever since.

"I had written in the past, but only for myself. That year, my father passed away in July. I was looking for a healthy outlet to deal with my grief," recalled Lopez.

"During one of the workshop sessions, the director of the group at that time asked me if I wanted to join the team and help plan workshops for veterans and military families."

When the pandemic created concerns about in-person gatherings, KCVWT was able to move things online. Lopez is grateful because he knows how meaningful the program is to veterans who take part.

"The objective of the program is that attendees write about their military memories, begin the process of owning their stories, and by doing so, possibly negotiate their way around serious barriers," Lopez said.

"The monthly critique group allows members to continue to hone their writing skills and share their personal stories in a safe environment, offering the camaraderie of military life."

Lopez is proud of the many veterans and family members who have published poems and essays, and two members have recently published books. But he gets the most fulfillment from seeing people do something they didn't think was possible.

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“I’ve had veterans tell me they wrote about something that happened in war that they have not spoken about before to anyone,” stated Lopez.

“Many of our members are Vietnam veterans who were in a war more than 40 years ago. That’s a heavy burden to carry for that long. I’m glad to be a small part of allowing someone to unpack that.”

As someone who is concerned about mental health and veterans, Lopez has found KCVWT to be helpful not just for people he knows, but for himself. He primarily writes poetry and has been published in Veteran's Voices, Haiku Journal, Line of Advance and Sisypheus Literary Magazine. His essay “I am a Coconut” won the Imagine Your Story contest held by the Johnson County, Kansas, Public Library in 2020.

In 2019, Lopez began painting. His piece “The End” was published in High Shelf Press and featured in the 10th Annual Expressions Art Exhibition hosted by The Whole Person, a nonprofit serving people with disabilities.

“I think art is an important medium to bring awareness to issues that are important to me,” Lopez said.

“I enjoy the camaraderie of the KCVWT group and the willingness of all the members to listen to each other. I believe we need much more of that in our society now – to take the time to slow down and listen to each other. Literature and the arts have been doing this for many years.”

Understanding the importance of community and camaraderie is one of the main reasons Lopez is honored to work for and be a member of the VFW.

“The VFW is community. This is why I’m proud to say ‘I am the VFW.’”

To find out more about the VFW's #StillServing campaign or to share your story, visit vfw.org/StillServing.