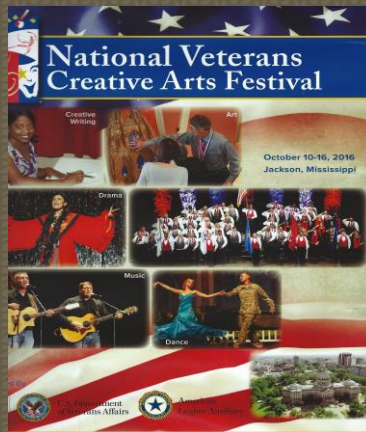


VA National Creative Arts Festival

Anthony W. Anderson (2016 Therapeutic Arts Scholarship recipient)
Perry Point Maryland.

Summary of the VA National Creative Arts Festival Held in Jackson Mississippi October 10th through
October 17th 2016.





My road to the 2016, VA National Creative Arts Festival, in Jackson Mississippi started about two years ago when I became a patient at the VA Hospital Perry Point Maryland. At that time, I was recovering from serious depression, PTSD, and anxiety, and prior to coming to Perry Point, could not see the beautiful things happening around me. I was taken to Perry Point by ambulance to building 364A, which was then, a locked psychiatric unit. When I got off the gurney, and walked to the back of the unit, I looked out of a big plate glass window, and a voice inside of me said “you’re in the right place, everything is going to be alright” I felt a calmness come over me, and at that point, I just let God takeover. I then stared out of that window, and for the first time in my life, I could see beauty.



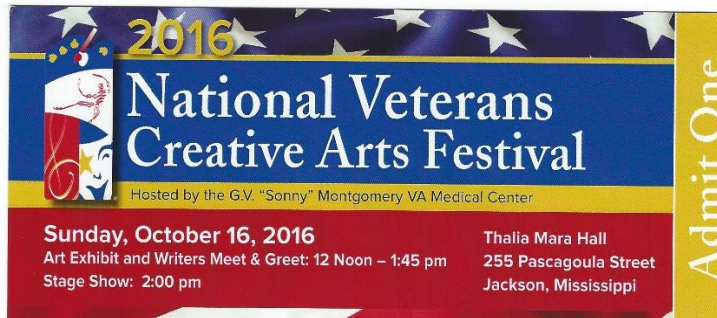
After leaving 364A, I was transferred to building 24H, which is a program designed to integrate Veterans back into society as productive members. When I got there, I was on blackout for two weeks, and could not go anywhere. After the blackout period, I was able to go back to Baltimore, and pick up my car, so I did. When I took the car back to Perry Point, I remembered that I had my camera in the trunk, so before going to sleep that night, I prayed to God, “just let me please get a picture of an eagle the next day”. The very next day, I was walking along the Susquehanna river at the VA, when an Eagle came out of nowhere, and landed on a tree right in front of me, I hit the shutter button twice then he flew away. It turned out to be a great photograph, the Eagle looked like he was posing with a fish that he had just caught, from that point on, I was hooked on photography. I started showing my photographs to anyone that wanted look at them, and word started getting around the VA about the photographs.

I was contacted by Mrs. Sharon Weise (the suicide prevention coordinator at Perry Point) she asked me if I would like to submit some of my photos to her, so that they could be made into greeting cards for the Veterans. Mrs. Weise said that I should enter the Visual Arts competition, and pointed me in the direction of Shermaine Johnson, who oversaw the recreation department at Perry Point. I was apprehensive at first because, I did not think that my work was all that great to be entered into an art competition. Mrs. Johnson gave me a lot of inspiration, praise, and confidence, I could not turn her down. She also showed me a video of the previous National Creative Arts Festival, and after looking at the video, the video inspired me to at least try, and maybe have the opportunity to attend the festival one day.

I entered my first regional competition in 2015, which was held at the VA Hospital Perry Point MD, I placed second in the color / black & white categories. The experience was humbling, not because I came in second place, but just participating gave me such an appreciation for the recreation department, and all the hard work that it must have took to put on such a great event. I felt very special being in the presence of so many great local artists. Looking at all the beautiful art work that was submitted, made me start thinking about the national competition, and how special it would be to represent Perry Point, on that level.



I entered the local contest again in 2016, and placed first in the color/Black & white categories. After the contest, Shermaine Johnson told me that a Therapeutic Scholarship would be awarded to a Veteran, and if I would like her to submit my name for it. I did not know what she was talking about at the time, I thought it would be cool to go to school on a scholarship so I agreed. I found out later that my Photos were not chosen by the National Creative Arts Festival Committee, but then again I was chosen for the Therapeutic Scholarship. A few months later I found out what that meant, I would be going to the National Creative Arts Festival, which was in Jackson Mississippi. When I received the news, I had been going through a lot in my life. I was a patient again at Perry Point, and homeless once more, after surviving a home invasion that happened in October 2015. This news helped to uplift my spirits, and the timing could not have been more perfect, it was if God was intervening again in my life to get me back on my feet.

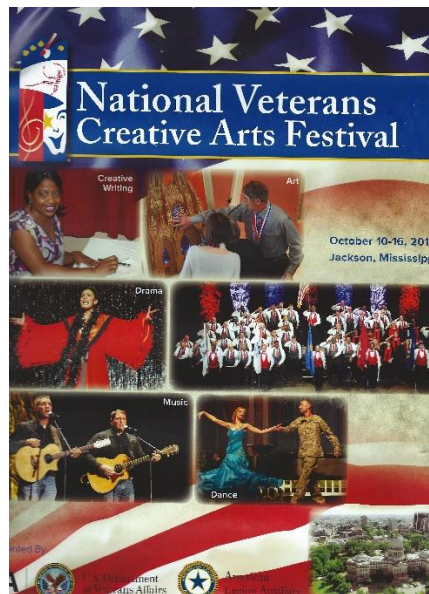


My experience at the festival was one that I will never forget, from the time I got off the plane, until the time I got back on the plane to go back to Maryland, was incredible. There were members of the 172nd Airlift Wing, Mississippi Air National Guard, and members from the VA Hospital to greet us when we arrived. The airmen carried our bags for us to this luxurious bus that was waiting. The bus took us to the hotel, not just any hotel, it was the beautiful Marriott hotel in downtown Jackson. After getting off the bus we got our room assignment, and registration process completed. During the registration process, we were given our schedules, nametags, all sorts of gifts, and assigned to a team. The Hospitality shown from the J.V. (Sonny) Montgomery VA Medical Center, Jackson Mississippi, and the members of the American Legion Auxiliary, including the Maryland Auxiliary was heartwarming throughout the festival.

The first day was the opening ceremony, and after that a band played music in the ball room, while we ate dinner. Some enjoyed Karaoke later that evening, and some like myself went to the hospitality room, later that evening, which the American Legion Auxiliary had set up and maned throughout the festival. The hospitality room was very nice, it was stocked with snacks, pastries, coffee and other beverages. Some of the participants from the performing arts, would gather there at night with their instruments, and have jam sessions. These jam sessions quickly grew with so many people, such that they had to be moved to one of the meeting halls, later that week. The second day of the festival was the artist interaction session, we had the opportunity to see all the winning pieces of art on a big screen. The artist that were present at the festival had the opportunity to talk a little about their winning piece. I had the privilege of speaking about how photography was therapeutic in my recovery process, and how it transformed my life for the better. After the Artist interaction session, we loaded buses for a trip to the Vicksburg National Military Park.

Every day of the festival was filled with something for us to do, art workshops such as; mosaics, working with fiber, working with paper, and mixed media. The workshops gave me a better understanding of Art in general, and made me feel like I could be an artist one day. We also toured the Mississippi Art Museum, which had a lot of local art on display. The art displayed there gave you a feel of southern life, and culture of the past and present. Saturday and Sunday were the best two days of the festival, Saturday we went to Thalia Mara Hall, which was in the art district of Jackson, and where the festival's art was put on display for the public. The hall was also the site where the performing art show would be held the next day. I was in awe after looking at the winning art pieces, and talking to the artist that had produced it. Some of the pieces of art were museum quality, I could not help but wonder, how nice it would be to have a National Veterans Creative Art Museum, so that everyone can see the art of a veteran and a sense of what this person was thinking when they produced it.

The performing art show was a production that you would see on television or even Broadway. It was the perfect ending of a perfect Art festival. I would love to be a part of the next festival which will be held in Buffalo New York next year, but until then, and in the future, I'll be an advocate for the Creative Arts Festival, Locally and Nationally.



Anthony W. Anderson