



Speakers and Artist Bios

Dylan Tête is the Executive Director and founder of Bastion Community of Resilience. A graduate of West Point and LSU's School of Public Health, Dylan has served in Iraq as second-in-command of an Infantry company and established multiple recovery projects in collaboration with the Department of State. Before his most recent position as a civil servant working alongside the New Orleans Deputy Mayor of Public Safety, Dylan was hired by Military.com to assist transitioning military personnel and wounded warriors begin new careers in the civilian workforce.

Lovella Calica is Bastion's onsite social worker and got her Masters in Social Work from the University of Michigan. Lovella is a writer, photographer, and multimedia artist. With backgrounds in human development, English and social justice organizing, she offers a unique perspective as a social worker and develops creative, collaborative ways of communicating and supporting people. She has been working with veterans since 2004 and is a military family member. She is the founder of Warrior Writers and has edited four anthologies of veterans' writing and artwork. She is trained in TRE (Tension & Trauma Releasing Exercises), EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization & Reprocessing) and Mind-Body Skills - all of which she utilizes with Bastion residents.

Russell Midori is a documentary filmmaker, photojournalist, and President of Military Veterans in Journalism. He specializes in technical field production and is a co-founder of Drum Circle Media.

Kayla Williams is a former sergeant and Arabic linguist in a Military Intelligence company of the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) whose service included a year-long deployment to Iraq. Kayla is the author of *Love My Rifle More Than You: Young and Female in the U.S. Army*, a memoir about her experiences negotiating the changing demands in today's military. Ms. Williams graduated cum laude with a BA in English Literature from Bowling Green State University and earned an MA in International Affairs with a focus on the Middle East from American University. She currently lives near Washington, D.C. with her husband, a combat-wounded veteran. Her book *Plenty of Time When We Get Home: Love and Recovery in the Aftermath of War*, about his injury and their joint path from trauma to healing, was also

published by W. W. Norton.

Thomas Brennan is the founder and Executive Director of The War Horse, an award-winning nonprofit newsroom reporting on the human impact of military service. He served as an infantryman in Iraq and Afghanistan before studying investigative reporting at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism.

Michael Pitre is a Louisiana Native , Micheal Pitre joined the US Marines in 2002, deploying twice to Iraq and attaining the rank of Captain before leaving the service in 2010 to get his MBA at Loyola. His novel, *Fives and Twenty-Fives*, follows an American road repair crew and bomb disposal team in Iraq.

Kiam Marcelo Junio is an interdisciplinary artist, holistic healer, and U.S. Navy veteran. Their research and embodied practice investigate the mercurial qualities of queer identities, creation myths, Philippine history, diasporic studies, and methods of personal and collective healing.

Jenn Tuero (JT) Blatty is a photojournalist (Redux Pictures) and the author of *Snapshots Sent Home* (Elva Resa, 2023), a military memoir. She graduated from the United States Military Academy at West Point in 2000 and served six years as an active-duty US Army officer, deploying with the first troops into Afghanistan following 9/11 and again into Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom. After serving in the military, she pursued freelance photography and writing as a career. She has spent the last four years in Ukraine, covering volunteer soldiers fighting to preserve their country's democracy, and received a 2021-2022 Ukraine Fulbright scholarship to finish *Snapshots Sent Home*, while continuing her photojournalistic work in the Donbas. Her work has garnered international attention.

Kevin Basl is a writer, musician, and anti-war activist living near Ithaca, New York. He served in the U.S. Army from 2003 to 2008 as a mobile radar operator, and he twice deployed to Iraq. Over the past decade, he has taught many writing and art workshops for veterans and their communities, with Warrior Writers, Frontline Arts, and Community Building Art Works. He holds an MFA in fiction from Temple University, where he has also taught writing. He is author or editor of several books, including a chapbook of poems (with Nathan Lewis) *Corn, Coal & Yellow Ribbons* and the forthcoming collection of poems and stories *The World You Once Loved*. He is an editor and instructor for Out of Step Press, a small press that produces limited edition handmade books and offers workshops on papermaking, bookmaking, and more.

Jeff Key is an American actor, playwright, veterans advocate and activist. He is also an honorably discharged Marine and Iraq veteran. His one-man performance piece, "The Eyes of Babylon," is based on journal entries he wrote while at war. Jeff is the founder of The Mehadi Foundation, a non-profit organization designed to help veterans find solace and employment in

the Arts/Entertainment industry and to support philanthropic efforts in Iraq.

Mahmoud Chouki is a master guitarist, multi-instrumentalist, and composer who has performed around the world and is currently based here in New Orleans. He teaches music at the Lycée Français de la Nouvelle-Orléans, and is Music Curator for monthly music programs at the New Orleans Museum of Art.

Chantelle Bateman is a mother, writer, and mixed medium visual artist. Her work exploring themes around race, gender, and the absurdities of militarism has been featured at the Dodge Poetry Festival, exhibited at the Chicago Veteran's Art Museum, published in numerous anthologies, and displayed nationally in the traveling exhibit "From War to Home."

Vainuupo (VA) Avegalio is a retired United States Army Veteran and self-taught amateur mixed media artist and poet. His art and poetry focus on his experiences serving in Afghanistan and other undisclosed regions of the world as well as his daily struggle with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Vainuupo tries to bring the chaos of war and raw trauma from the battlefield to canvas and paper with vivid color, texture, and word play.

Mark Caesar is a nationally touring standup comedian from New Orleans who performs and hosts shows across the city. Mark is also a stage play writer and the founder of Now or Never Apparel. Mark is a long-time resident of Bastion and a father of four.

Seema Reza is an author based in Maryland who has led writing workshops within correctional facilities, military and civilian hospitals, grade schools, and universities. She is the CEO of Community Building Art Works, which encourages the use of the arts as a tool for narration, self-care and socialization among a military population struggling with emotional and physical injuries.

Kim Defiori is a retired Army Officer. Last year she published her first book "Lessons from Thor: Healing with a Service Dog's Touch" and had her first ever poem published in the CBAW Anthology "We Were Not Alone." Kim received her undergraduate degree in Psychology from the United States Military Academy, and MBA from Cornell University. She will start her PhD at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health in Health Policy and Management in the fall of 2022. Kim enjoys hanging out with cats, dogs, horses, and giraffes.

Alexis Laryea is a 15 and some years veteran from Chester, Pennsylvania. She served in the Army Reserve as a 75F and 42A. Her goal was to retire after 20 years but she came home sick from deployment. The Army told her they had no use for a soldier with an autoimmune disease, so she was medically retired and left to figure things out on her own. Alexis went back to school to become a mental health counselor to help others deal with the trauma in their lives.

Belena Stuart Marquez commissioned into the United States Air Force in 2008 from the

Virginia Women's Institute for Leadership at Mary Baldwin College. She served as a Public Affairs officer until her retirement in 2021. Her notable assignments include deployment to Afghanistan in support of Operation Enduring Freedom, serving as the Media Operations Officer for Air Force Special Operations Command, and work for the Secretary of the Air Force's Public Affairs Plans and Strategies Division. Notable decorations include the Bronze Star Medal, the Meritorious Service Medal, and is currently petitioning for the award of the Purple Heart Medal due to injuries she received in combat.

Joseph Merritt was medically retired from the United States Marine Corps in 2016 after 10 years of honorable service. Joe rediscovered art during his medical treatment and has a successful career as a professional artist, exhibiting his work and presenting gallery talks across the country. He is a steward of the veteran art community, leading art programming with active duty and veteran populations in D.C., Maryland, and Virginia.

Ben Weakley spent fourteen years in the U.S. Army, beginning with deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan and finishing at a desk inside the Pentagon. He writes poetry and prose about the enduring nature of war and the human experience for veterans, their families, and anyone who would help them bear witness to war and its aftermath. A believer in the power of words to empower and heal, Ben leads writing workshops for Active Duty Military, Veterans, their families and caregivers, as well as Frontline Health Care Workers and other communities of ordinary people bearing witness to a difficult world. Ben lives in the Tri-Cities of Northeast Tennessee with his wife, two children, and a well-meaning but poorly behaved hound dog.

Jimmy White IV is a South Philadelphia native who served in the US Navy from 2000 to 2006 as a nuclear electrician on board the fast attack submarine, the USS Montpelier during Operation Iraqi Freedom. Through his military career, he earned three Navy Achievement Medals, was named Junior Sailor of the Year and achieved the rank of 1st class petty officer. He is currently the Director of Engineering for Four Seasons Philadelphia, a professional speaker through his company (Jimmy White Speaks LLC), a GW Bush Center Veteran Leadership Program Scholar, an alumni of Leadership Philadelphia program, a national award winning Youth/Veteran Advocate with the Travis Manion Foundation, a TEDx Speaker, the Founder-In-Residence at Venture Café Philadelphia OnRamp Entrepreneurship Cohort, a member of the Military Veterans in Journalism Speaker Bureau and Inspirational Speaker for the Philadelphia Union IAM Project. He is a minister and loving husband to his wife, Theresa and father to three amazing boys, Jim-Jim, Jo-Jo and Jack-Jack.

Anne Barlieb is medically retired from the Army in 2018 after 14 years of active duty service as a helicopter pilot, psychological operations officer, and strategic planner. Her autobiographical, ekphrastically-based writing contains intimate portraits of life survived and well lived in the face of great adversity, overwhelming uncertainty, and cascading redemptive synchronicities.

Eventually, philosophies, doctrine, and archetypes hug to death the ego's vulnerable sense of self. When we find the mind knee deep in a field of its own venomous snakes, Anne's body of work is the reticulated python slowly, quietly, repeatedly reminding us of what is inherently ours to know: life's sweetest juice is worth its tightest squeeze. Even in the most fragile, unexpected, devastatingly conflict-ridden or war torn moments, given a courageous psyche and its eternally delicate human heart, we don't get to play dead to our deepest, trembling desires, ever.

Raina Laliberte-Baron is a 33 year old transgender woman and disabled veteran. She joined the U.S. Navy in 2010, trained as a Firecontrol man, and was discharged in 2014. She suffers from major depressive disorder and general anxiety disorder, as well as rheumatoid arthritis. Raina uses art and writing to explore her experience in the military, as well as her transgender identity. She lives in Massachusetts and has two adorable rescue dogs.

William Young is a veteran artist who served 20 years in the U.S. Army. Using a camera for as long as he can remember, time in the dark room helped him to sharpen his craft. He was introduced to writing by caring souls that brought poetry into his life during his time as a hospital patient.

Belard Ernest is a native New Orleanian who joined the Coast Guard in 1977 and served until 1981. He worked on a construction boat and did navigational lights as well as buoys and also worked as a storekeeper. After getting out of the military he worked on a tugboat and drove semi-trucks for about 17 years. Belard has four adult children who all live in New Orleans. Belard has been blind for 18 years and has been a Bastion resident for 6 years, and his Bastion experience has helped instill courage and independence. The VA has assisted with his prosthetics, technology and training to adapt to his new lifestyle. He is a member of the Blind Veterans Association and National Federation of the Blind and enjoys being around blind people as much as he does being around sighted people.

Nick Valentino joined the Navy in August 2003. He deployed to Iraq doing detainee operations at Camp Bucca from August 2006 - August 2007. He then deployed to Bahrain to do anti-piracy missions off the coast of Somalia from September 2008 - September 2009. After that he deployed to Afghanistan doing force protection and convoy operations for the Army Corps of Engineers at Camp Phoenix from October 2012 - October 2013. He is part of Bastion's Headway program, and is serving as Bastion's Agriculture Associate which entails managing various food sustainability projects around the facility including the garden, chickens and food pantry. He is currently retiring out of the Navy and will continue treatments to help manage his injuries and spend as much time as he can with his children, Owen, Kennedy and Jazmin. His short term goal is to prepare for a hike of the complete Appalachian Trail. His long term goal is to learn everything he can about agriculture and being self-sufficient.

Jessica Edwards is an Army veteran, single mother, and a resident of the Bastion community.

She is a certified Reiki practitioner, who enjoys helping people heal through the power of touch. In her free time, she offers Reiki to veterans in and outside of Bastion. She enjoys attending movies, art exhibits, lunches, and other events with the Headway program participants. She is passionate about music and loves sharing songs with her Headway friends as a way to bond, and bring a little joy into their hearts. Being part of the Bastion community has helped her heal from her own military related trauma, and she is honored to have the pleasure of healing with some of the greatest, strongest and most resilient people she has ever met.

Joe Hargrove III (AKA DJ Tank) is a US Army retiree, who served 22 years as a Chemical Operations NCO, holding numerous positions throughout his military career from 1985-2007. He grew up in New Orleans' Broadmoor neighborhood, and received a music scholarship to attend Grambling State University. He majored in chemistry and minored in biology. He was also a member of the world-famed Tiger Marching Band and traveled around the world playing the trumpet, trombone and percussion. He is the proud father of a son who owns his own company, and he has lived at Bastion for four years and is a very active member of the community. He recently joined the Bastion staff as Headway Program Assistant, providing support to veterans with TBI.