

## Songwriting With Soldiers by David Conrads

Darden Smith Listens, Strums a Bit, Then Helps Soldiers Write Their Song

This story first appeared on the Christian Science Monitor.

SongwritingWith:Soldiers provides a healthy emotional outlet. The songs help others facing similar challenges and build a bridge between military service and civilian life.

By David Conrads

BELTON, TEXAS — It's a warm, clear morning just outside Temple, Texas. Darden Smith sits down after breakfast with his guitar and his laptop, as he often does, to write a song. In a career that spans nearly 30 years, the native Texan and longtime Austin, Texas, resident has written and co-written innumerable songs, recorded 14 albums, and performed all over the world.

This morning, Mr. Smith is collaborating with Marsha Cook, who has never written a song in her life. In fact, she neither sings nor plays a musical instrument.

Smith and Ms. Cook make an unlikely songwriting team. But similar collaborations are happening this morning in the lodge and all around the grounds of the Cedarbrake Renewal Center in central Texas, where SongwritingWith:Soldiers, a nonprofit organization Smith founded, is hosting a weekend-long retreat.

The concept is simple: Pair military veterans and active-duty troops with professional songwriters in a tranquil setting. Then let the service members tell their stories while the songwriters mold those stories into lyrics and set them to music.

The hope is that the songwriting will provide a healthy emotional outlet for the service members, and the resulting songs will be a source of pride, a help to others facing similar challenges, and a bridge in the gap between military service and civilian life.

Cook tells her story while Smith types some notes, strums his guitar, and asks questions. Mostly, he just listens.

An Army veteran and homemaker, Cook spent decades as a military spouse, raising six children and dealing with a variety of mental and emotional challenges, many of them connected to war-related traumas suffered by her husband.

As Cook talks, themes emerge from her experiences, and Smith begins shaping her words into lyrics. Georgia Middleman, a veteran of the Nashville music scene and one of the

other four songwriters at the retreat, joins them.

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In about an hour, the three have crafted a sweet, catchy song in the classic country style of Kitty Wells or Loretta Lynn. Cook beams as Smith plays “The Woman in Me” and Ms. Middleman sings its two verses and a bridge. “It’s wonderful,” Cook says when the two finish. “It really captures all the things I have been feeling all these years.”

“We all have a story,” Smith says later. “When we listen, and listen well enough to take the soldiers’ words and turn them into art, and sing it back to them, something happens. What it is, I don’t know. I’m a songwriter, not a therapist. But something happens, and it’s powerful.”

In the two years since founding SongwritingWith:Soldiers, nearly 100 soldiers have participated in weekend retreats, as well as similar one- and two-day on-site sessions held at US Department of Veterans Affairs centers, military hospitals, and other locations. Several hundred songs have been written and recorded so that each participating service member has something tangible to take away from the experience.

All the songs are registered with the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers. The service members share the writing credits: This ensures that they will share in any potential royalties generated by their work.

For Smith, SongwritingWith:Soldiers is the culmination of years of collaborative songwriting with people who aren’t songwriters. In 2003, he launched the Be An Artist Program, classroom workshops for children intended to inspire creativity through a series of exercises and a group songwriting session. Smith has taken the Be An Artist Program to some 15,000 children across the United States and Western Europe.

“Songwriting is a great way to get people to tell their stories,” he says. “The Be An Artist Program showed me that you can write a song with people who don’t write songs. It prepared me for writing songs with soldiers.”

A chance meeting with a soldier following a performance in a military hospital cafeteria in Landstuhl, Germany, inspired Smith to engage with members of the military, a segment of the population with whom he previously felt he had no connection. In 2008, he and Radney Foster wrote “Angel Flight,” a song about the Air National Guard crews that fly home the bodies of fallen soldiers. The strong response to the song from the military opened up an opportunity for Smith to try out collaborative songwriting with wounded soldiers at a retreat in Colorado under the auspices of an organization, now defunct, that helped soldiers transition to civilian life.

Mary Judd, a childhood friend with experience in program development, accompanied him. The collaborative songwriting with the service members was a resounding success. “We were amazed at how open and trusting the soldiers were with their stories and experiences,” says Ms. Judd, who now serves as executive director of SongwritingWith:Soldiers. “A connection and a trust came about pretty quickly, as well as a need for the soldiers to tell their stories. We could see that it was really helpful.”

When the group in Colorado dissolved, Smith and Judd established SongwritingWith:Soldiers, holding their first retreat in 2012.

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Stacy Pearsall was an aerial combat photographer in the Air Force until she was medically retired in 2010 following her second injury from an improvised explosive device in Iraq.

She wrote a song with Smith at the retreat in Colorado and has returned to SongwritingWith:Soldiers as a participant, photographer, and unofficial mentor. She holds the distinction of being the very first service member to have co-written a song in the program.

"There was a lot of sensitive stuff discussed, things I hadn't talked about with anybody," she says of that first collaborative session. "I'm not going to spill my guts to a complete stranger, but I related to Darden because he was genuinely interested in listening to me. Sometimes that's just what we need, someone with an open ear who is not passing judgment."

Ms. Pearsall adds that the songwriting provides a valuable framework for the soldiers to tell their stories and share their deep – sometimes deeply repressed – feelings.

Karen Vandiver, a therapist in Texas who specializes in trauma and has worked extensively with military veterans, says that the collaborative songwriting is a form of emotional release. She recommends SongwritingWith:Soldiers to many of her clients, having attended several of the retreats and seen the benefits firsthand. "I believe respect is the highest form of love, and this is about respect for the soldiers' stories and respect for who they are," she says. "It's also a validation that somebody else cares. Of course, this is not the end of the process, but it is something that soldiers and veterans can build on."

Chris Chirco participated in a retreat with SongwritingWith:Soldiers in the spring of 2013. The US Army infantryman spent 11 months in the Wardak Province of Afghanistan, one of the most violent and contested parts of the country.

"I saw some crazy stuff," Mr. Chirco says with ironic understatement. Back home, diagnosed with a variety of traumas, he began drinking heavily and "spiraling out of control" until he met an Army chaplain at Fort Hood, Texas, who helped him turn his life around. He soon connected with SongwritingWith:Soldiers. At the retreat he worked with Smith and co-wrote three songs.

Chirco still tears up when he listens to his song "I'm Not Supposed to Be Here," which touches on everything from his accidental conception to his survivor's guilt. "The songwriters take the worst thing that has ever happened to you and turn it into something beautiful," he says. "The experience energized me and really set me back on the path to healing."

While service members attend the retreat voluntarily, some are slow to open up, especially to a civilian. But Smith's approach of quiet listening has never failed him.

"I've never had a soldier not get involved once they saw that we are actually listening, actually paying attention," he says.

Visit [www.songwritingwithsoldiers.org](http://www.songwritingwithsoldiers.org).

Feature photo (top): Darden Smith (l.) works with Dustin Crites (c.) and Gary Nicholson in a SongwritingWith:Soldiers retreat in Belton, Texas. Photo by Stacy L. Pearsall