

# Veterans' voices are part of the music of Common Ground



Instructor Josh Hisle recalls the story of a veteran's frustration with his treatment by VA personnel during a session of the Common Ground on the Hill Veterans Initiative in Westminster Wednesday, July 4, 2018. (Dylan Slagle / Carroll County Times)



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**R**ight after the Bush era, when tensions over the United States' involvement in the Middle East were especially high, Josh Hisle, a veteran of the **U.S. Marine Corps**, came to play music at Common Ground on the Hill.

After playing original songs that referenced his combat experience, he was part of the Search for Common Ground, a discussion class that got heated quickly. The pent-up frustration and confusion over what was going on became directed toward him.

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is could have a place in a program with an anti-war

Things have changed. This marked the seventh year of the Common Ground on the Hill Veterans Initiative, which provided scholarships for about 20 veterans to come to Common Ground for free. Some of those who initially came as participants now teach their own workshops.

Common Ground on the Hill is a three-week-long lecture and education series that has events like concerts, art galleries and dances. It began on Monday, June 25, at McDaniel College and culminates with the annual Common Ground on the Hill Roots Music & Arts Festival on Saturday, July 14, at the Carroll County Farm Museum.

Hisle is the founder and chairman of the Veterans Initiative. Some of those with the strongest opposition to his performance in that first year are now close friends.

“There’s no beef,” he said.

He leads a daily class of the same name, which started as a way for the veterans to regroup and check in during the middle of the day. It’s open to civilians and veterans alike, and the numbers of both have fluctuated over the years.

In the first year of the initiative, the class was packed, starting with about 40 people and growing closer to 55 as word spread.

This year, during the second week of Common Ground in 2018, the class was about five people, with friends, veterans and guests popping in and out.

This isn't a sign of the program's lagging popularity.

Veterans are still at Common Ground, but they’ve filtered out and are taking music or art or discussion classes during that time slot.

“It starts to become business as usual. That’s the goal,” Hisle said.

Hans Palmer, a Marine veteran, who began coming to Common Ground in 2013, is one of those who organically filtered out of the Veterans Initiative class over the years as it began to conflict with others he wanted to take during that time slot.

He didn’t consider himself an artist, but came to Common Ground after Hisle recommended it one night while they were playing video games.

“It’s a folk arts and music camp,” he said, describing it, “but it’s more of a gathering of loving people who accept you for who you are — and I *know* how that sounds.”

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and each day focuses on an issue or several ones  
d from participation in arts programs to the phrase

“thank you for your service, to addiction and overmedication and suicide to the experiences of veterans of Vietnam

In addition to meeting class guests in person, other voices were also introduced through the documentary “[From War To Wisdom](#),” directed by Hisle and documentary filmmaker Dan Collins, who also helped to lead the class.

The film centers on Marines including Hisle and others from the same battalion who have returned to civilian life. The men are highly competent warriors from the most decorated battalion in Marine Corps history, but they are not immune to the difficulty of coming home.

Along with interviews with the veterans, the filmmakers had access to hours and hours of footage taken by a journalist embedded with their battalion overseas. The footage is not just from the same conflict or the same country — it depicts the person on screen while he was deployed.

One section of the documentary focuses on the Veterans Initiative, where many of the relationships between Collins and the veterans were formed.

Common Ground founder Walt Michael speaks on film about the response of civilians to the Veterans Initiative.

“I don’t think that unless we hear their stories, and allow them to be OK with their stories, then we’re doing our jobs as citizens.”

The footage also depicts Collins and Hisle singing during Common Ground. One of the lyrics is, “I’d rather be a killer than a no good, fair-weather friend.”

It’s easy to imagine this is one of the lyrics that set off such a heated discussion the first time.

During class discussion, the topic turned to the duality of the experience of combat, which is difficult for veterans to express and difficult for civilians to understand.

Veterans’ feelings about their service and about the war are not always the same. Veterans are not a homogeneous group with the same opinions or experiences.

The class discussed how the sentiment about veterans can swing the opposite way from the antagonized discussion of Hisle’s early experience toward infantilizing concern.

Hisle demonstrated, tilting his head to the side and asking, “Are you OK?” in a slow, sugary-sweet voice. This can go wrong during an arts program, especially, if someone expects a veteran to have a breakthrough or a healing epiphany on-command.

e others more likely to ask intrusive questions, as if

“What can we do? What should we say?” one class participant asked.

The question did not have an easy answer, and it came up in discussion.

Hisle spoke about the snags that had occurred over the years as civilians and veterans mixed at Common Ground. The initiative is not going to be the place for every veteran, he and Palmer said.

Collins spoke about the years-long relationships he had formed with the veterans in “[From War To Wisdom](#),” before they agreed to the in-depth interviews captured in the film.

Most agreed that any successful connection between civilians and veterans — whether through a large program like Common Ground or a one-on-one conversation — is found by approaching the discussion with sincerity. This doesn’t always mean success, and all may be required to take feedback from the experience and try again.

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