

# Museum brings the art of healing to veterans

Tom Wilemon, *The Tennessean* 11:27 p.m. EDT April 16, 2014

NASHVILLE, Tenn. – Aaron Voris limped up to a war scene.

He left his cane behind that night, but he could not get rid of the emotional pain by himself. Holding his wife's hand, he relived his time in Iraq walking through Steve Mumford's War Journals: 2003-2013 at Nashville's Frist Center for the Visual Arts.

"It is like you're holding up a snapshot of your memory to the person you are telling it to," he said.

That's how he explained the experience sitting with a group of other military families who also had just toured the exhibit. Soldiers and

Families Embraced, a Clarksville-based counseling service, is taking the novel step of bringing mental health services right into the art museum. Group tours and therapy sessions will continue until the exhibit ends June 8.

Along the walls of the Frist, depictions of makeshift memorial services and emergency amputations are juxtaposed against tranquil moments of soldiers playing volleyball under palm trees or having Big Macs at the McDonald's on an air base in Kuwait.

Mark Scala, the Frist's chief curator, who leads the tours, describes the exhibit as "art as an instrument of healing."

"I have never seen people respond with so much emotion," he said.

Mumford chronicled a decade from one war, but his paintings and drawings spur veterans of all ages from different conflicts to recall hidden memories. A realist, he was embedded with the troops in the same tradition as the magazine artists who traveled with soldiers during the U.S. Civil War.

Professional counselors help the veterans release their secret pains.

"A lot of our soldiers who go into combat don't come back with any kind of photographs," said the Rev. Jodi McCullah, executive director of Soldiers and Families Embraced. "They struggle sometimes to be able to remem-



(Photo: Steven S. Harman, *The Tennessean*)

ber or share."

On a recent Thursday night, veterans from different conflicts talked about the commonality of their experiences. Bill Fritschler told how a scene of National Guard troops throwing candy to children reminded him of giving away chewing gum decades earlier when he was in the Vietnam War. The Rev. Clayton Gregory, who served in Kosovo, looked at a depiction of the makeshift memorial and broke down in tears, expressing regret for not making it to Iraq and ministering to soldiers there.



*Bill Fritschler said a part of the Frist exhibit that shows troops throwing candy to children reminded him of giving away chewing gum when he was in the Vietnam War. (Photo: Steven S. Harman, The Tennessean)*

'I sat at that same bench looking at the same McDonald's that soldier was looking at. I was the exact same guy sitting there in that picture.' "

It was a volunteer who connected the dots between the Frist and Soldiers and Families Embraced. The volunteer, Genma Holmes, said the exhibit was a natural fit.

"This is what the Frist does anyway," Holmes said. "It brings people together. Being from a military family, in a military family and the mom of a service person, I've seen the responses — seeing how much they change from when they come in until when they leave."

The piece that almost every veteran from Iraq connects with is the one of the McDonald's at Ali al Salem Air Base in Kuwait. It symbolizes the gateway to and from war. Voris ate 2 1/2 Big Macs there after an 8 1/2-month tour in Iraq.

"That's the first sign of civilization you see for almost a year," he said. "I told my wife,