

WOUNDED Warriors

by Michael Conforti

A WRITING WORKSHOP GIVES DISABLED VETERANS A VOICE

photos by Lewis Politan

Br. Rick Curry, SJ, founder and artistic director of The National Theatre Workshop of the Handicapped (NTWH), created the Wounded Warriors program, writing workshops for disabled veterans. The goal of these two ten-day sessions this summer was “to help disabled veterans better cope with their challenges, to connect veterans from around the country with one another, and, above all, to get veterans’ stories out and onto the page, the screen, and the stage,” according to NTWH’s web site.

The setting was NTWH’s Crosby Campus, a former high school in Belfast, Maine, on Penobscot Bay. Staff, including author Michael Conforti, helped introduce the craft of writing to a diverse array of disabled military veterans and witnessed their integration into NTWH’s artistic community.

WE WERE SEATED at a long wooden table in the refectory. Sunlight trickled through the tree-shaded windows, and the morning air breezed in cool and mild, a redolent mingling of evergreen shrub-growth and brewing coffee. This was our last meeting, the last time these Wounded Warriors and I would gather as a workshop to discuss the art and craft of creative writing, and it was turning into a bit of a roast at my expense.

To my left, straight-backed in his wheelchair, eyes hidden behind dark sunglasses, face framed by long silver hair, was Ken, a Hawaii native and retired Army Special Forces Operative, 1966–1969. Across the table was Rhonda, from Oklahoma, one of the first female paratroopers. Next to her was Chris, a retired army supply sergeant from California, who had recently had his right leg amputated due to a misdiagnosis that nearly cost him his life. Then there was Trueman, the youngest of the bunch by a full generation, who had been wounded by an improvised explosive device in Iraq.

Their faces shone with fatigue and satisfaction. Every one of them had watched the culmination of their efforts



This isn't "healing
through The Arts,"
this is **"The Arts"**



The National Theatre Workshop of the Handicapped gave veterans, including (clockwise from top) Linda Ysewyn, Jim Figeroa, Michael Jernagen, and Trueman Muhrer-Irwin, the simple opportunity to write. Muhrer-Irwin, hit by an improvised explosive device in Iraq, told of his losing a comrade and dealing with survivor's guilt. Ysewyn's words echo the thought: "Combat alters the importance of everything," said this former army captain in a *New York Times* story about NTWH. "Telling the story helps with the journey back."

the night before on stage at the National Theatre Workshop of the Handicapped's (NTWH) Crosby Campus in Belfast, Maine, played to a packed house. The standing ovation was not the point. They were writers and their stories had been crafted and delivered, first on the page, then, in collaboration with the NTWH actors, on stage.

"Powerful stuff, Michael, *powerful*." Ken was mimicking me, my Brooklyn accent, the way I sometimes punctuate sentences with unconscious hand gestures, and the rest were taking his cue, repeating *powerful* to one another and suppressing laughter. It was a word, evidently, that I had employed a few times too many over the past ten days. Then came the punch line: "But I'm just not sure if the payoff feels *earned*. Does this feel earned to you, Michael? I'm still unclear as to the narrative motivation,"

and he mimed a slash mark through an invisible mid-air manuscript, mouthing and scribbling *Rework*, pinching his brow in concentration.

I had to laugh along with them. At least the quip was craft based. But it was time to return to task.

A writing workshop should function as editor, critic, fan club, and occasionally, therapist. It should be a safe environment that internally generates permission to tell whatever stories one finds compelling, in whatever voice one finds apt, without fear of how one will be judged as a person. It should focus on craft.

This group had arrived ten days earlier as four individuals—inclined to write, curious about the workshop process, wary of me as their teacher, of one another, of letting long suppressed demons rise to the surface—and they had managed to become a good writing workshop. This

was no small transformation.

But it was a transformation that Br. Rick Curry, NTWH's founder, has grown accustomed to, both here in Belfast, where NTWH has been holding theater retreats and workshops for the disabled for the past 10 years, and at their lower Manhattan playhouse, where similar work has been going on for the past 30. The Wounded Warriors writing program was a new and timely twist on an old and successful formula: if everyone undresses, no one feels naked. Use your pain; don't cling to it.

I put three questions to my students: What would they have been doing if they weren't here? What will the next step be in terms of life and in terms of writing? What did they get out of this workshop? This was a group exit interview—fuel for one final class discussion.

As they went around the room with their answers, I found myself turning inward. I thought of Ken, who had broken down each time his piece was read out loud by one of the actors, until the Saturday night show, when he finally made it through. He had introduced himself on the first day by saying, "I'm exhausted. I've been fighting this war for too damned long. Maybe *this* will help." I took "this" to mean that by shaping his raw experiences with words and offering it up to our theatrical community to be performed, he might share some of his burden. Before he left the last day, he wrote on the community notice board, "I did in twelve days what I've wanted to do for forty years. What the hell took me so long?"

I thought of Rhonda, who began the session stuttering and mumbling, smoke-screening her intelligence with nods and luminous but inarticulate smiles, now addressing the group so clearly, so confidently. She suffered a brain injury a few years ago, and she would tell me later that the workshop process had given her back the right to behave like a whole person.

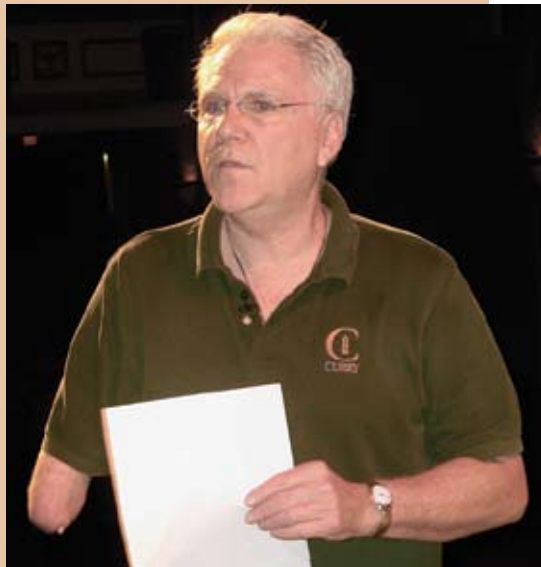
I thought of Chris, this gentle bear of a man, who had nearly cried from frustration over his struggles with the written word, lamenting that learning to express

National Theatre Workshop of the Handicapped Founder and Director

Br. Rick Curry, SJ, founded the National Theatre Workshop of the Handicapped (NTWH) in 1977 after earning a PhD in theater from New York University. His idea for NTWH was straightforward: to give people with disabilities training in theater arts. Some participants have gone on to jobs on stage and TV, but the combination of academic and practical theater experience that NTWH offers all its writers and actors makes them better communicators on and off stage.

NTWH, headquartered in New York City, has also converted a former high school in Belfast, Maine, into a residential facility. This was the site for the summer's Wounded Warriors workshops, supported by a grant from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, that allowed Curry to gather U.S. veterans and to help them get their thoughts and experiences first on paper and then on stage.

Curry, missing a forearm since birth, has been on *60 Minutes* and



The Today Show by dint of his work with NTWH and his authorship of *The Secrets of Jesuit Breadmaking* and *The Secrets of Jesuit Soupmaking* (he trained as a baker during his early years as a Jesuit). He recently played a psychiatrist on an episode of the TV detective series *Monk*.

himself in this mode was as difficult for him as learning how to walk with a prosthetic leg. He had been beaming with pride and gratitude ever since he saw his completed scene performed.

I thought of Todd Fringer, an Iraq War vet, who had participated in an earlier session. He told me that writing was a kind of rebirth for him. That he was discovering a part of himself he hadn't known before he was paralyzed. That he had never realized how badly he wanted permission to write his stories until it was granted.

And I thought of Mike Jernagen, also from the earlier session. He was the reason I asked my class to discuss what they would've been doing if they weren't in Maine, writing dramatic monologues.

When I met Mike, I noticed the two-inch-thick scar that curved like a horseshoe through his Marine "high-n-tight" haircut, bisecting his scalp. He told me later that his humvee had been hit by two 155-mike-mikes—artillery shells—one day when he was driving down a quiet street, not engaged in combat. As he put

it in his monologue, "There is no rear, in Iraq."

He suffered serious damage to his skull, hand, and knee, and had to undergo 30 major surgeries. He lost both eyes and was considered a medical miracle for surviving and for the fact that his cognitive abilities remained intact.

ARIC MAYER



John Spalla, with a master's from Hartt College of Music, has been NTWH's music director for 14 years and dean for 10.

We worked together closely, transferring and editing the raw material of his voice-recorded storytelling sessions onto paper. He told me during one of our meetings that the opportunity that NTWH was providing for him with the Wounded Warriors program had come like a godsend. All of his former outlets were either gone or greatly diminished due to his disability. He spent his days "sitting alone in the dark with all of these stories in [his] head."

I realized as he said those words that that was the point of all this. That was what Curry had been talking about all along.

The participants in the Wounded Warriors program are coping with three separate but related types of isolation. They're disabled in an able-bodied world. They're soldiers and Marines taken from the front lines and thrust back into civilian life. And they're artists without a full understanding of what that means, without support or direction in the medium that excites them.

Veterans were invited to NTWH's residential facility in Belfast, Maine, for intense writing workshops and training in the performing arts.

The standing ovation was not the point. They were writers and their stories had been crafted and delivered, first on the page, then, in collaboration with the NTWH actors, on stage.

Curry, in NTWH, has created an artistic community—now, with his Wounded Warriors program, and with his theater school in Manhattan—that allows disabled artists of varying skill levels to abandon their isolation and immerse themselves in creative pursuits. This isn't "healing through The Arts"; this is "The Arts" in a community manifesting its transformative power: four people enter a classroom as strangers and become a writing workshop. One person, instead of sitting alone, in the dark, with all these stories in his head, gathers some of the tools he'll need to tell those stories the way he wants to tell them and gains an audience, a support system, and friendships with other young artists who share his drive to create. Dozens of people—writers, teachers, actors, singers, dancers, musicians—come together to create an environment of trust and candor, an environment that internally generates permission for these transformations to take place, allowing experience to become knowledge, pain to become power, and craft to become everybody's number-one priority.

Two weeks after the second session, some NTWH actors and many of the disabled veterans gathered in Westhampton Beach, Long Island, for the summer's final performance. A host of NTWH's current and potential benefactors were present, making it one of the most important shows of the year for the organization.

Between musical numbers, the

Michael Conforti graduated from Williams College in 2003 with

a degree in English literature. He is working on an MFA in creative writing at Columbia University and also his first novel.



Jerome McGill and Danny Murphy were among NTWH actors who performed in a gala at the Westhampton Beach Performing Arts Center on Long Island that featured the veterans' writings.

vets either read their own pieces or introduced them and stepped aside so one of the NTWH actors could perform their work. In Trueman's case, what was offered represented a fully realized synthesis of the NTWH theater school and the Wounded Warrior writing program. He had rediscovered the desire to act, something he hadn't done since high school, while at work crafting a dramatic monologue dealing with events that caused the death of a friend and comrade, almost cost him his foot, and left him traumatized, ridden with survivor's guilt after returning from Iraq. Trueman used the weeks leading up to the show to work closely with the actors and acting instructors, enabling him, on the

night of the show, to offer the audience a well-honed dramatic performance of his own written work. It was a triumph of craft and a good example of the sort of self-actualization possible in community with other artists.

Curry told me that he conceived of the Wounded Warriors writing program after meeting a young vet of the Iraq War who had lost a leg. The young man told him that he couldn't find his center, that he felt lost and didn't know what to do or where to go. By welcoming these vets into the artistic fold of NTWH, Curry has provided them an opportunity to create and commune, and a locus for self-examination, self-discovery, and empowerment. ■

