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The Theatre Lab Receives a $44,000 Creative Forces Community Engagement Grant for the Life Stories® program to Support Veterans and Military Families

(Washington, D.C.), June 6, 2023 – The Theatre Lab School of the Dramatic Arts is one of 34 organizations nationwide selected to receive a Creative Forces® Community Engagement grant. A grant of $44,000 will support healing and community building through The Theatre Lab’s Life Stories program for individuals connected to the military. Creative Forces Community Engagement Grants are part of the National Endowment for the Arts’ Creative Forces® initiative and are in partnership with Mid-America Arts Alliance.

Creative Forces®: NEA Military Healing Arts Network is an initiative of the National Endowment for the Arts in partnership with the U.S. Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs that seeks to improve the health, well-being, and quality of life for military and veteran populations exposed to trauma, as well as their families and caregivers. Creative Forces Community Engagement grants will increase access to arts activities in more communities and will serve a broad population, including active-duty service members, guardsmen, reservists, veterans, military and veteran families, as well as caregivers and healthcare workers providing care for military service members and veterans.

“We are excited to witness how these arts engagement activities have the power to enhance the health and well-being of our military and veteran populations,” said Maria Rosario Jackson, Ph.D., chair of the National Endowment for the Arts. “These Creative Forces Community Engagement projects are vital in helping to improve the quality of life for people connected to the military, bolster health equity through the arts, and build healthy communities where all people can thrive.”

Developed at The Theatre Lab, Life Stories is an innovative program that teaches young people and adults from underrecognized populations to create original dramatic works using their own life experiences. Since its inception, The Theatre Lab has provided Life Stories programs to more than 4,000 people in the DMV area, including youth and adults who have been incarcerated, returning veterans, seniors, and families impacted by homelessness. In recent years, The Theatre Lab has increased its engagement with individuals connected to the military through its Life Stories programming by partnering with several organizations, including TAPS (The Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors), Camp Brown Bear, Armed Services Arts Partnership, and Wounded Warrior Project, to build community and support participants on their path to healing past trauma.

“The Creative Forces Community Engagement grant will make a transformational impact on our work with people connected to the military,” says Deb Gottesman, Co-Founder and Co-Executive Director at The Theatre Lab. “The Life Stories program was founded on the belief that everyone deserves to have their story told—especially those whose voices often go unheard. With this grant, The Theatre Lab will expand our programs that work with families who are grieving the loss of a military loved one and with veterans who are living with PTSD. Life Stories provides an opportunity for people to take control of their own narrative, which is a critical step on their path to healing. We are honored to be a part of the inspirational group of arts organizations awarded this year.”
For families grieving the loss of a military loved one, the effects of Life Stories have been profound. One military veteran noted that his experience in Life Stories helped save his life: “I was going down a dark path, but this workshop showed me that people genuinely care about your story.” A TAPS parent participant also said, “I will never forget the first [Life Stories] class. It was February 13, 2019, just past the five-year anniversary of my husband’s death. Now, five years later, my girls and I are learning to laugh again, thanks to our teachers at The Theatre Lab.”

Todd Stein, President and CEO of Mid-America Arts Alliance said, “We’ve seen how art can create new bonds of connection and understanding through the Creative Forces Community Engagement projects, especially for those in our military communities who may feel isolated and alone. We are honored to partner with the National Endowment of the Arts on this grant program, and we are continually inspired by the power of these projects to deliver hope and healing to our service members, veterans, and their families.”

By providing opportunities for engaging in the arts, The Theatre Lab seeks to help participants better understand themselves and others through creative expression while increasing their sense of belonging to our community. Participation in the arts often leads to an individual and shared sense of fulfillment and positive self-worth, supporting their ability to adapt and readjust to life’s challenges.

For more information on Theatre Lab’s Life Stories program, visit https://theatrelab.org/life-stories/

About The Theatre Lab
The Theatre Lab School of the Dramatic Arts transforms lives through accessible, high-quality theatre education. For over thirty years, The Theatre Lab has offered a wide range of programming for students of all ages, from beginning theatre artists to professional actors. The organization believes acting is a powerful tool that, when applied, can help anyone better understand themselves, on stage and off. The Theatre Lab is more than the largest nonprofit theatre school in the Washington, D.C. area—it is also a welcoming and supportive community of theatre artists, actors, and students that make the artistic and real-life benefits of theatre training accessible to all. Learn more at www.theatrelab.org.

About the Creative Forces Initiative
Creative Forces: NEA Military Healing Arts Network is an initiative of the National Endowment for the Arts in partnership with the U.S. Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs. The initiative seeks to improve the health, well-being, and quality of life for military and veteran populations exposed to trauma, as well as their families and caregivers. Creative Forces is managed in partnership with Americans for the Arts, the Henry M. Jackson Foundation for the Advancement of Military Medicine, and Mid-America Arts Alliance. More information can be found at arts.gov/creativeforces and creativeforcesnrc.arts.gov.

About the National Endowment for the Arts
Established by Congress in 1965, the National Endowment for the Arts is an independent federal agency that is the largest funder of the arts and arts education in communities nationwide and a catalyst of public and private support for the arts. By advancing equitable opportunities for arts participation and practice, the NEA fosters and sustains an environment in which the arts benefit everyone in the United States. To learn more, visit arts.gov or follow us on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube.

About Mid-America Arts Alliance
Mid-America Arts Alliance (M-AAA) strengthens and supports artists, cultural organizations, and communities throughout our region and beyond. To learn more about M-AAA grants, programs, exhibitions, and fellowships, visit www.maaa.org and follow us on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn.

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