

Combat Paper Project turn combat uniform into art

BY **MADISON FLAGER** | PUBLISHED 02/02/15 12:28AM



Drew Cameron, co-founder of the Combat Paper Project, visited Gerrard Hall this weekend to run a workshop for veterans from the community.

Photo by Cameron Robert

Standing before a picturesque field, with mountains and a setting sun in the background, Tyler Stevenson saw three young Afghan girls playing.

It was an idyllic scene, and he pulled a camera out to capture the moment. Each time he touched his camera, though, the girls ran out of sight. Realizing the cultural aversion to photographs, Stevenson began a game of “Simon Says” instead, making funny faces at the little girls as they erupted in giggles.

Touching moments like this one stand out to Stevenson just as much as the hard ones — moments like losing three close friends while serving in Afghanistan. He had the chance to

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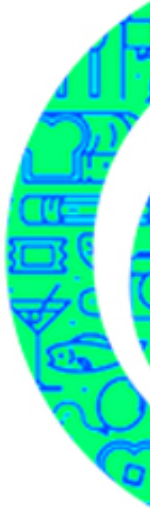


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Combat Paper Project co-founder Drew Cameron gave visitors tutorials in making their own paper using retired military uniforms. Stevenson brought his U.S. Army uniform, cut it up, put it into a machine that beat it into pulp, and then turned it into paper — a process he called a liberating experience.

“It was a way to turn it into a visual representation of my service,” said Stevenson, now a senior attending UNC through the GI Bill. “It’s an artifact from my service, but it was liberating in the sense that it’s no longer kept away in this box where I don’t see it, no one else sees it. It’s a piece of art. I can display it in my house and I’ll be able to keep it for years to come.”

The workshop was open to the public and saw well over 100 visitors, including veterans, students, UNC faculty and community members. Participants learned how to sift the pulped uniforms through a bin of water, press the fibers onto a felt board and decorate



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their newly made paper with a stencil and dyed pulp. The finished product was then hung to dry for a day.

Visitors came from as far as Richmond, Va., said Aaron Shackelford, Mellon post-doctoral fellow at Carolina Performing Arts, which hosted the workshops.

“One thing that really struck me is the range of people who have come,” Shackelford said.

The program was brought to UNC by way of the Kronos Quartet, who will perform at Memorial Hall on Feb. 12 to commemorate the World War I centennial, but Shackelford said it was particularly important because of North Carolina’s military ties.

“North Carolina is one of the most military-friendly states in the U.S., and as the (state’s) flagship university, we really want to respect that,” Shackelford said. “Drew’s work really exemplifies how arts are part of a much larger conversation on campus.”

Stevenson served from 2006 to 2010, spending a year in Afghanistan and time stateside in Fort Hood, Texas and Fort Knox, Ky. He said he wants to give outsiders a better look at veterans’ experiences.

“For every photograph that you take overseas, for every video you take, there’s thousands of moments that can’t be captured that are inside you,” Stevenson said. “I’m hoping that people can see that it’s a way for veterans to further relay their experiences to the outside world.”

Marshall Montgomery, an ROTC member at Appalachian State University, plans to join the army in a year and a half. After traveling to UNC for the event, he said he was glad to see support for the military.

“With a decade of war, you have a lot of (post-traumatic stress disorder), so it’s cool to see these kinds of programs offered for veterans,” Montgomery said.

Though the uniforms hold a certain reverence and respect, he said, there’s a positive transformational experience that can occur in getting rid of something that is reminiscent of such strong emotions and difficult experiences.

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Cameron began the project in 2007 after serving four years of active duty and two years in the National Guard. He began touring and hosting workshops that same year, visiting universities, bases and warrior transition units around the country and internationally.

Cameron said he plans to continue offering the workshop for as long as people keep enjoying it.

“This has been such an amazing gift to be able to do this work.”

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