

At 91, CNY Man who Survived WWII Gives Back to Today's Veterans Through Art



SYRACUSE, NY: Reginald Adams, a 20-year-old from Buffalo, found himself in the spring of 1945 in the middle of the Battle for Okinawa, one of the bloodiest battles in the Pacific in World War II.

For 82 days, U.S. troops battled the Japanese to take control of the island 340 miles from mainland Japan. It was the largest amphibious assault in the Pacific.

Adams was a signalman on a landing craft infantry mortar ship, handling messages with Morse code and flags. He remembers the fighting going on day and night. He saw kamikaze Japanese suicide pilots crash planes into ships, including ones that took out a sister ship.

He recalls thousands of men dying. By the time the battle ended, more than 110,000 people were dead.

"From day to day you didn't know if you were ever going to survive, and it bothered me in years to come," said Adams, who now lives in Manlius.

After returning home, Adams said he struggled with depression and couldn't forget what he had seen. Years later, his depression, he believes, would have been diagnosed as post-traumatic stress disorder, an illness not officially recognized by doctors by that name until 1980.

"You see these things, they're indelibly in your brain and you can never get rid of it — you just have to deal with it," Adams said.

To cope with his illness, he turned to art, something he had loved since his mother introduced him to it when he was a boy.

"Art helped me readjust into civilian life again," he said.

Adams, 91, has never given up his love of art. He turned it into a teaching career for 34 years, most in Central New York schools.

Art still helps him deal with bouts of depression. And for the last seven years, he's volunteered to use art to help veterans who suffer from PTSD and other illnesses.

Adams, born in Stamford, Conn., grew up in the city of Buffalo where his love for art began. His mother taught Adams how to knit and crochet and bought him art supplies.

He went on to graduate from South Park High School with a fine arts diploma. Right after graduating, he entered the U.S. Navy and soon shipped off to the Pacific.

In his three years of service, Adams spent two years in combat in the Pacific. The landing craft infantry mortar ship he was on was responsible for clearing the beaches by firing 40-pound shells before the ground troops were sent in. The ships would also create smoke as a distraction to enemy cruisers and dive bombers that were continuously attacking.

After returning from the war, Adams studied fine arts at Syracuse University. Through the GI Bill, he received a bachelor's and a master's degree from the university at no charge.

He became an art teacher in 1950, working in Central New York elementary and middle schools. He retired in 1984 from Jamesville-DeWitt Middle School.

Now, a few days a month, he conducts art therapy classes for his fellow veterans at the Syracuse VA Medical Center. Some of the classes are scheduled, while others are impromptu as he walks different floors of the hospital following his own medical appointments.

"I am a teacher, and when you're a teacher, when you're trained you teach, it's like breathing," he said.

When he sees veterans to help, Adams, takes out his art supplies and talks to them. He shows them his work and explains how creating art can help them cope.

Adams — using tactics he learned teaching school children — said he's not trying to teach the veterans to be artists.

"I'm training them to be able to see things, understand what they are looking at, express their feelings," he said. "It's like a printout of how your mind works."

How much veterans get involved, Adams said, depends on what fills their needs. Some participate, collaging and coloring; others just watch. Sometimes he just discusses art theory with the veterans.

Erin Popcun, therapeutic recreation specialist at the Syracuse VA Medical Center, said Adams really explains an art project, its meaning and how veterans can make it their own.

"It's not just an arts and crafts project," she said. "He really gives it purpose and different ways of looking at things."

It is the nonthreatening aspect of art that is beneficial for the veterans, Popcun said.

Some veterans are reluctant to talk about their war experiences or, in some case, don't talk about anything, she said. Art, since it is nonverbal, allows the veterans to explore memories or feelings, she said.

Adams said that art helps veterans because it gives them something to concentrate on for some time and allows them to forget everything else. Through art therapy, Adams said the pressures to produce and be correct no longer exist.

"It's an idea that I tell them that they can't make a mistake," Adams said. "Everyone in the group is doing something different."

For the veterans, art can also be a form of physical therapy, Adams said. As people get older, they can have trouble with their hands due to arthritis and age. With art, people their hands in ways they would not normally use them, he said.

Suzanne Hawes, lead recreational therapist at the Syracuse VA Medical Center, said it is Adams' personable and enthusiastic personality that makes it easy for him to get along and connect with his fellow veterans.

Adams understands the strength of art therapy as a method to help with post-traumatic stress disorder, depression or social anxiety, Hawes said. Adams has the ability to make someone happy and feel better, she said.

"It's pretty significant when you see someone very depressed and withdrawn engage in an art class," Hawes said. "I think a lot of times we don't value that."

Adams, at his age, is also an inspiration to younger veterans to be involved, she said.

When he is not at the Syracuse VA Medical Center, he also teaches art at Menorah Park Center for Senior Living in Syracuse and Clear Path for Veterans, a Chittenango-based resource center for service members and their families.

"Art... my whole life is art," Adams said. "And I still enjoy teaching, to watch the reaction of people that I talk to."

Adams still works on his own art in a studio on the lower floor of his home that he shares with his wife of 63 years, Elsie. Together they raised two sons who are now adults: Bob, an architect, and Bruce, a journalist.

His studio — and home — are furnished and decorated with his artwork ranging from paintings and mobiles to lamps and dressers.

Adam will soon be parting with some of that artwork. He is preparing to downsize, and so will be opening his home and offering 200 pieces of art for sale on Oct. 22 and 23.

What's his favorite style of art? It's whatever he is working on at the moment, he said.

Adams said he enjoys working with found material. For example, sometimes he uses scrap pieces from L. & J.G. Stickley furniture factory to make his own furniture and carvings. One of his two work stations in his studio was completely built from Stickley's scraps. He also uses eggs shells and yarn to give his paintings texture, and images from magazines to make collages of his time in the service.

Adams, like other veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder, still remembers the battles he lived through in World War II, the people who died. He still at times battles his depression. He says when his depression comes up, he likes to always stay busy. He often heads to his studio.

"I have art," he said. "I have an escape." syracuse.com This article written by Ali Linan.