

With singer Mary Gauthier, military veterans find a voice

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NEW YORK (AP) — There's a date on Josh Geartz's calendar that the former U.S. Army sergeant has been looking forward to for quite some time.

Aug. 10 will mark Geartz's fourth retreat with the nonprofit SongwritingWith:Soldiers — his first session there in 2015 saved his life. Literally.

"I'd already attempted suicide twice," the 38-year-old said, "both times were more of a reaction and wasn't a planned thing. It was more in the moment, like, 'All right, screw this.' So I was like, 'Third time's a charm. I'm going to get it right this time.' I had my plan. I knew when, where, how."

His wife had told him about a SongwritingWith:Soldiers session coming up in a month near their home in Albany. The wheelchair-bound Geartz, who was in the army from 1999 to 2004 and served in Iraq and Kosovo, eventually decided to go. There, he met folk singer-songwriter Mary Gauthier. He credits her with changing and saving his life.

"I think that once you get to that point where you truly believe that people are better off without you, you're at your lowest. And then I think some of that started to change a bit when I told Mary everything. I told her stuff that I didn't tell anyone, nobody knew, and she just basically gave me a hug and said, 'Man that sucks, but I'm really glad you're here.' And I'm just like, 'Whoa,'" he recalled.

"I've had therapists break down and cry in the middle of sessions and leave the room. So I'm expecting something like that. Instead I got support."

Geartz's experience has been repeated by other veterans, who have found peace and newfound hope with the program and Gauthier, who released an album this year exclusively featuring songs co-written with veterans and their family members from sessions with the nonprofit organization.

"Rifles & Rosary Beads," the critically acclaimed 11-song project, recently earned a nomination for album of the year at the 2018 Americana Music Honors & Awards, to be held Sept. 12 in Nashville, Tennessee.

"One of the beautiful things about the way that it works is that the songwriters are not therapists. So we don't have a duty to not cry or to assess them. You know, we're just songwriters, so I can cry if I need to, and I do cry. We all cry, and we cry together," Gauthier said.

“With any trauma, it’s ineffable at its core, you can’t find the words, there are no words. Music can come in and fill the gap where there are no words. So I can find the music, and all the songwriters can find the music that sounds like what the feeling is and that conveys the feelings.”



Gauthier wants to be clear — though she knows the process has helped veterans — she, too, has learned so much while listening to their stories and turning them into songs.

“I think that’s important it’s not couched as if I’m doing this Mother Teresa thing. It doesn’t work that way,” the 56-year-old said with a laugh. “I’m getting every bit as much as I give. Soldiers have taught me so much. They’ve taught me humility. They’ve taught me service, at a very deep level, sacrifice. They’ve taught me consistency. They’ve taught me about love.”

Gauthier had worked with SongwritingWith:Soldiers for over four years, completing close to 15 sessions and writing roughly 40 songs.

“I think we have a lot of stories about soldiers, or about war. I don’t know if it’s ever been done before where it’s done with them, so that these are their words,” she said. “And somewhere in the process the veteran starts to see, ‘Oh my God, this story might help other people. To tell it might be a continuation of my service.’ And they’re into that. They want to continue to be of service.”

Geartz has seen the effect the song he co-wrote, “Still On the Ride,” has had on others when he performed the song with Gauthier at the Grand Ole Opry and Ryman Auditorium in Nashville (he plays harmonica on the track).

“I had a female come up to me after one of our shows, she goes, ‘Can I give you a hug? I just want to thank you. I haven’t been able to show any emotion for years and I was able to cry tonight,’” he recalled.

“And then I had a lady call me and say listening to the four-minute song answered 50 years of questions she had about her father,” he added. “It kind of gave me a purpose and a mission to support and promote this organization that helped save my life.”

Geartz, who was wounded by an improvised explosive device in 2003, lugged his wheelchair for 422 miles last summer for veteran suicide awareness. The father of two will return as a volunteer to the upcoming SongwritingWith:Soldiers event, giving a helping hand to veterans in the way others assisted him. Songwriter Georgia Middleman will help craft songs and the retreat also includes sessions on cooking, yoga and videography. Geartz will teach a class on the harmonica, which he has played since was 7.

“It’s like a big family reunion — one of the family reunions you want to go to,” Geartz said.

For Gauthier, the process “feels like my passion has collided with purpose.”

“I am very, very lucky to have been given this opportunity to midwife these songs and then to be the one to bring them into the world. I feel a sense of rightness about it, that I have mined myself thoroughly. I’ve said what I need to say about me. And the next right thing for me as an artist, clearly, is to help give voice to other people’s story.”