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# Aspen Daily News

## Challenge America growing through guitar decoration project

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By Jacqueline Reynolds Aspen Daily News Staff Writer

Challenge America embarks on round two for its guitar decoration project, inviting local artists in the Roaring Fork Valley to design guitars that will end up in the hands of veterans across the country.

The well-received project came about in November as an innovative addition to Challenge America's music therapy program, which was the first program developed through the national veterans' nonprofit based in Basalt, leading musical retreats for veterans in natural settings throughout the United States.

Following a successful first experience in the fall, the decorated guitars initiative has naturally grown Challenge America's arts and music programming, explains Executive Director Dallas Blaney. And in only four short months, the project returns with greater local participation, community involvement and ongoing benefits for veterans near and far.

"I mean, there's so much great energy that came out of last time — it was more successful than I could have possibly imagined, and the artwork was just incredible," Blaney said. "And the great thing about it is that



A collection of acoustic guitars decorated by local artists in the Roaring Fork Valley were displayed in the Basalt Regional Library in November and are now being used by veterans participating in the Challenge America music therapy program. A second round of artist-designed guitars is in the works and will be showcased at TACAW April 1-2. Molly Briggs/ Aspen Daily News

we discovered all kinds of interesting things about the veterans and what really resonates for them."

Donated by the HeartStrings Foundation, the first round of artist-decorated acoustic guitars — which were showcased in the Basalt Regional Library at the end of November — are now being used by veterans participating in the current series of music therapy retreats.

In collaboration with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), Challenge America recently held a retreat in West LA, and the therapeutic series will continue to run through the end of the summer, with Las Vegas up next, followed by an all-women veterans retreat in Muskogee,

Oklahoma, then the final one takes place in Maine in early August.

Prior to attending these retreats, veterans are able to view the selection of designed guitars through the Challenge America website and pick out the one that "speaks to them," Blaney said. The guitars are then shipped off to the various workshop locations and the veterans leave their retreat experience with this customized, artistic keepsake and healing tool, handcrafted by Roaring Fork Valley artists.

Each decorated guitar additionally includes a note written by the artist who designed it, and veterans have the option to reach out to their

artist, Blaney explained, creating far-reaching connections between the Roaring Fork Valley and the larger veteran community.

“We’re always trying to find creative ways to get the veterans to bond with their guitar — to continue to see their guitar as something they can turn to even after our work with them ends on a formal basis — and this decoration thing definitely does that,” Blaney said. “Because these veterans are hanging their guitar on the walls of their home as a piece of art, and so they’re seeing it every day in a way that they wouldn’t with just a plain-Jane guitar.”

Blaney emphasized how the decorative element is changing the way the veterans experience music and heal through art. Through this artistic addition, Blaney said he’s learning that while the music itself may be very helpful for veterans, oftentimes it’s more of a “catalyst” for them to explore other art modalities and therapeutic opportunities.

“It’s not so important to me that people necessarily stick to music after they come through our retreats; what matters is that it opens their minds to other possibilities, other ways of healing,” Blaney said. “And if the music doesn’t resonate, maybe they get inspired by the guitar and the art of the guitar to pursue something else.”

On that note, Blaney brings up the Challenge America Veteran Arts Community (CAVARTS), an online

community space built for veterans to share their artistic endeavors and participate in workshops across all art forms. This private forum for the arts was started out of the music therapy program, Blaney said, and he points out the timely significance — today marks the one year anniversary of CAVARTS.

According to Blaney, CAVARTS currently has around 3,100 members from all 50 states and 13 countries, and the growing guitar decoration project has greatly enhanced the interconnected arts programming offered through Challenge America.

Due to the positive response to the project, the VA has already asked Challenge America to coordinate a proposal that would expand the music therapy program by 300% next year, Blaney said, increasing the number of participating veterans from what is now 50 to 150 per year.

“The way I see it is, this is just a stepping stone to even more growth and we’ll have to find more artists to design more guitars, but I don’t think that’s going to be hard,” Blaney said. “And after this second round, we’ll have guitars set up and ready to go when we expand this going into next year.”

Blaney explained how he’s seen this project spark greater inspiration, connection and involvement among not only the national veteran community, but also right here in the Roaring Fork Valley. From the local artists donating their time and creative

talent to these guitars to the local businesses and organizations displaying the guitars before they get sent off, Blaney said this project stands for something greater than itself.

“I think it’s so telling about how amazing our valley is, and it also demonstrates for the veterans who get these guitars that what’s going on is much bigger than just Challenge America teaching them music therapy — that there’s a much broader community supportive of them and veterans as a whole,” he said.

With the second round of guitars trickling in this month, Blaney expects around 35-40 decorated guitars to flood his Basalt office by the last week of March. The artists can also sift through more than 100 custom-designed Tandy Leather guitar straps and pick the one they feel best aligns with their design.

**On April 1-2, Challenge America will display the array of decorated guitars at The Arts Campus At Willits, coinciding with the Allan Harris “Cross That River” performance taking place that weekend at TACAW.**

**Before the show on Saturday, April 2, there will be a special meet-and-greet event with Harris — an award-winning jazz vocalist from New York City and longtime supporter of Challenge America — and his “Cross That River” cast, followed by an awards ceremony**

**for the decorated guitars. All proceeds from this ticketed event will go toward Challenge America and its music therapy program.**

Judges from Anderson Ranch Arts Center will vote on the winning guitars, and like the project's first go in November, the three winners will have their designs featured in the National Veterans Arts Museum in Chicago, Blaney said, adding that the Red Brick Center for the Arts will exhibit around nine of the guitars in mid-April.

"We hold onto these guitars until they're chosen and shipped off for the musical therapy session, and it'd be a shame to just leave them in the box all that time," Blaney said. "So we're definitely looking for more local businesses to display the guitars because we just want to give more visibility to the artists, and we want the community to see their amazing artwork and to know what's going on."