

The Mighty Pen Project

Is the pen truly mightier than the sword? This group thinks so. (L-R) M.E. "Mike" Malandro, CEO of Prince George Electric Cooperative (PGE); Denya Hankerson, PGE board member and Army veteran; David Robbins, Mighty Pen Project founder; Rachel Landsee, Mighty Pen Project executive director; and Dr. Clay Mountcastle, director of the Virginia War Memorial.



Every veteran has a story ... and when warriors write, the effect is profound, poignant and provocative

Lis the pen, as the timeless adage insists, mightier than the sword? For a group of Virginia's military veterans learning to write creatively, it just might be.

The Mighty Pen Project, brainchild of best-selling author and educator David L. Robbins, recognizes that every veteran has a unique story and that those warriors who have wielded the "sword" may very well benefit from the power of the pen.

Through the non-profit initiative, former military servicemen and servicewomen are offered semester-length, collegiate-level creative writing classes free of charge. Classes are taught by university writing professors and held in a classroom at the Virginia War Memorial in Richmond.

The goal is to create a living history of military service through writing: to generate, preserve, share and honor stories written by military veterans and their supporters. In short, says Robbins, "We want to serve those who have served."

The writing classes aren't just for former military members. The Mighty Pen Project, in partnership with the Virginia War Memorial Foundation, provides classroom writing instruction to any military veteran or immediate family member, as well as military support personnel.

"There are only 15 spots in each class, so we encourage people to apply early," notes Robbins, who teaches creative writing at Virginia Commonwealth University's Honors College. As a board member and founder of the Mighty Pen Project, Robbins has been teaching the writing classes since the organization's inception in 2014.

Robert Hoderne, chair of the Department of Journalism at the University of Richmond, is the instructor for January's writing class. Hoderne began

his 40-year journalism career as a freelance photographer covering the Vietnam War. "I've spent a good part of my professional life as a journalist covering war (three so far) and folks in the military. The Mighty Pen Project seems like a good way to keep working at that," he says.



Mighty Pen Project founder, David Robbins, and executive director, Rachel Landsee, greet Prince George Electric Cooperative CEO Mike Malandro (right).

During class, participants learn creative writing skills spanning multiple genres, including personal memoir, fiction and poetry. At the conclusion of each class session, the Virginia War Memorial hosts a public event where students read selections of their written work. Selections from the

session are also bound and preserved for future generations in the Memorial's Research Library. "We're proud to support the Mighty Pen Project. It fits into our mission of educating the public, serving veterans and preserving history," says Dr. Clay Mountcastle, director of the Virginia War Memorial.

The writing classes involve more than learning how to eloquently weave words together. Participants share of themselves. They reveal the humanity that drives them, cultivating the ability to express thoughts and feelings through the written word. For veterans, this can mean baring their souls and delving deep to put into words the emotions, observations and

experiences that may otherwise be too painful to remember. Oftentimes, this steps beyond telling a story. Participants in these classes learn to own their stories.

The effect is profound, poignant, provocative.

Denya Hankerson, Prince George Electric Cooperative (PGE) board member and former Army supply sergeant, has two decades of military experience under her belt. "Throughout my life, I've written hundreds of research papers. But when it comes to trying to tell your own story on paper, it's really difficult," she says.

It's the reason Hankerson looks forward to attending the writing classes. "It's something I really want to do — to effectively write my story and own it. I'm thankful for the Mighty Pen Project, a place where veterans come together to learn to write in a safe, trusting environment."

'When Prince George Electric Cooperative was asked to help sponsor publication of the *Mighty Pen Project Anthology & Archive*, we were happy to partner up with Fort Lee Federal Credit Union and support a program that helps those who have sacrificed and served,' says Malandro.

The veterans and their supporters who sign up for the class come from all walks of life. “The stories they write are varied and fascinating,” says Robbins. It’s not all tales of bravado and bravery, either. There’s much more to real-life military heroes. “It’s whatever they choose to put onto paper. Many of them write about combat or other experiences while serving, but others simply choose to write about family and hobbies,” Robbins explains.

For those veterans who choose to lay down old combat burdens to pick up the pen, writing has the power to heal. Gail Chatfield of *Veterans’ Voices* described this when she said, “We stand naked, exposed and unmasked by the presence of our words on a piece of paper. It is at that intersection of vulnerability and insightfulness that the journey of self-discovery through writing begins.”

What’s more, writing can boost the immune system, and reduce stress, anxiety and depression. In a world where veterans are often plagued by mental health issues and high suicide rates, picking up a pen could potentially stop a tortured veteran from picking up a gun. According to the Veterans Health Administration, the suicide rate among male and female veterans and military service members exceeds the national rate for the general population. Additionally, many service members are diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or depression.

“While our goal isn’t to provide therapy through writing, it happens on its own. It’s not our destination, but a stop along the way,” Robbins explains. By shaping and reshaping negative experiences and memories through the written word, they can ultimately be transformed into memories that no longer hurt. Says Malik Hodari, Mighty Pen Project graduate, “I learned technical aspects of writing that enabled me to cathartically express my experiences and 42 years of repressed pain. Learning with like-minded souls enables honest, free-flowing discourse.”

The benefits of the class also include the ability to help veterans feel less



“Every veteran has a story, whether they know it or not,” says Prince George Electric Cooperative board member and Army veteran, Denya Hankerson. “This writing program is invaluable to helping veterans learn to write their own stories — and I very much look forward to taking the class.”

alienated by sharing traumatic events and other experiences with other military veterans. “The class composition allows us — and the participants — to see lives of service and world events through a diversity of lenses, encompassing veterans, spouses, family members and friends spanning every military uniform through eras of conflict and times of peace,” Robbins explains.

As Mighty Pen Project writers open up about their military experiences, they do so in an environment of understanding and compassion. The thread that weaves together this group of men and women of diverse backgrounds is a deep understanding of service to country, of war, and of life following military service. It’s an understanding that extends beyond what can be put onto paper, a deeper acknowledgment of emotions that often go unspoken.

When M.E. “Mike” Malandro, Army veteran and Prince George Electric Cooperative CEO, first heard Robbins’ presentation about the program at a local Rotary Club meeting, he was immediately on board.

“Mike walked up and said, ‘I love what you’re doing. How can I help?’” recalls Robbins. “Rarely do I meet anybody who grasps so quickly — and with such enthusiasm — what we are doing with the Mighty Pen Project as Mike Malandro did. Mike, and Prince George Electric Cooperative, have been very supportive from very early on in our history. It’s gratifying to get that level of support.”

For Malandro, it was all about honoring the seventh cooperative principle, “Concern for Community.” He says, “As a co-op, it’s really important for us to give back to the community. When Prince George Electric Cooperative was asked to help sponsor publication of the *Mighty Pen Project Anthology & Archive*, a collection of writings from Mighty Pen Project participants, we were happy to partner up with Fort Lee Federal Credit Union and support a program that helps those who have sacrificed and served.” The poignant 73-page anthology includes some of the best pieces of the class’s written work for



David Robbins (center) leads the Mighty Pen Project writing class in the Schumann Conference Room of the Paul & Phyllis Galanti Center at the Virginia War Memorial in Richmond. The thread that weaves together this group of men and women of diverse backgrounds is a deep understanding of service to country, of war, and of life following military service.

the year. Additional Mighty Pen Project journals are planned for each year.

It's crucial for veterans to have a creative outlet, a liberating way to express themselves. Malandro would like to see more veterans get involved in the project. "Raising awareness about this writing program is really important," he says.

It's so important that Rachel Landsee, a former class participant, is now at the helm of the organization as its executive director. "It was an interesting twist of events," says the mother of two who served on active duty for eight years as a military attorney. Landsee first heard about the Mighty Pen Project through an errantly delivered newspaper on her doorstep.

Intrigued by the program, Landsee soon found herself immersed in the Mighty Pen Project writing class. She looked forward to each class, anxiously anticipating the writing instruction, the camaraderie with fellow participants, and hearing the varied stories. It wasn't long before Landsee realized she could play an important role in the organization.

"I became more involved in the organization because I was interested in creating systems to ensure the program's sustainability and access, to include growing the program in areas outside of

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Richmond. Veterans, and veteran supporters, who want to write should have the structure and guidance that they need to write, a precept at the forefront of each of our organizational decisions," she explains.

To donate to the Mighty Pen Project, visit www.themightypenproject.org/donate. All donations are tax deductible. "The voice of a veteran, or veteran supporter, is unique to understanding our collective history. Our writers' insight regarding war and military service is genuine and evocative. When several stories are read together, the voices encourage a conversation important to our culture and national dialogue," explains Landsee.

Robbins echoes the sentiment. "It's powerful stuff," he says. "When these veterans take a memory and turn it into a narrative, they turn the infinite into the finite. It's something they can share. Then it becomes a burden that many hands can make lighter. That's what we're doing here." ■

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