



2015 Helen and Martin Schwartz Prize Nomination

For a Council-supported Project



Summary

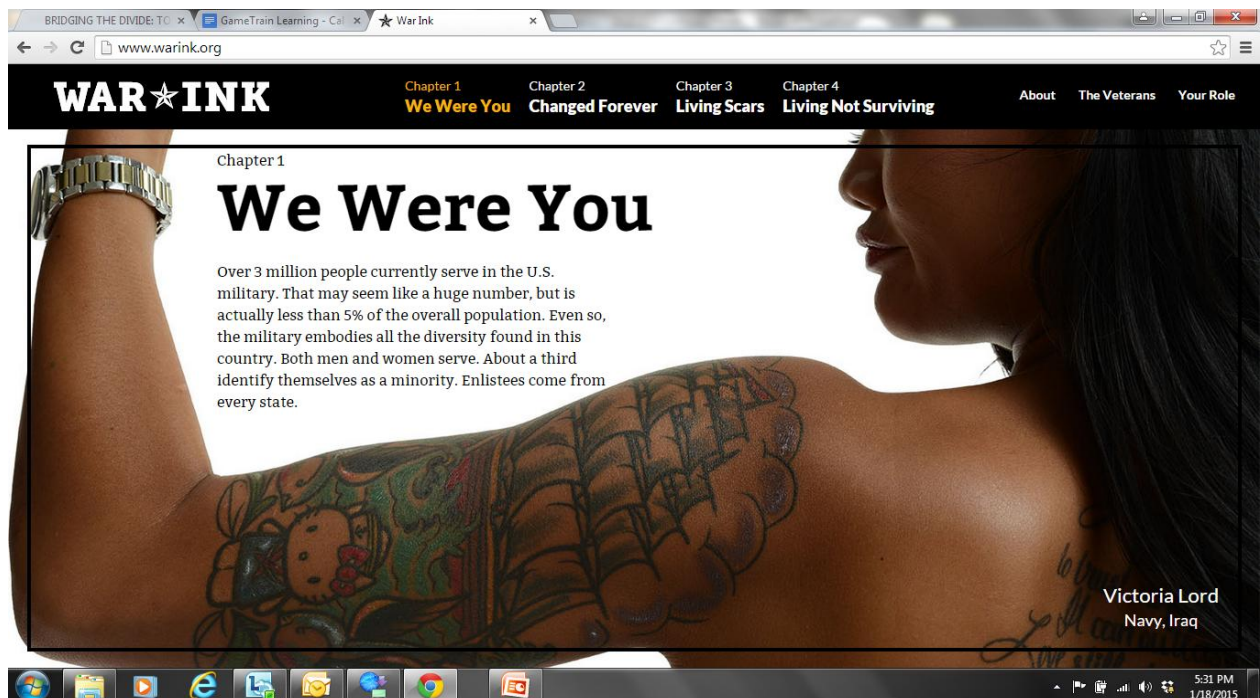
Cal Humanities is honored to nominate *War Ink* for consideration for a 2015 Schwartz Prize in the category of council-supported projects. This online interpretive exhibit of veteran's memorial body art – tattoos – enabled a group of California veterans to share their experiences of war and homecoming through an innovative form of storytelling that invited the broader public to hear and learn from veterans themselves, and to look at veterans and the veteran experience in a new way. Growing out of Contra Costa County Library's prior efforts to assist returning veterans, and supporting the library's mission to serve as a center of community memory and history, the project received initial support through a \$10,000 *Community Stories* grant. The exhibit, which launched on Veterans Day, November 11, 2014, has received over 41,000 visits, generated extensive media coverage, and garnered awards and recognition from the library, media, and design communities. *War Ink* illustrates how 21st century public humanities programming can make use of new technologies and reflect contemporary cultural forms while maintaining continuity with traditional humanities practices of reading, listening, reflection, and dialogue, in order to illuminate ideas and experiences at the heart of what it means to be human.

Project description

“Every tattoo on my body has a story. If they did ask, they wouldn’t get a movie or a book. They would get the real thing.” – Ron “Doc” Riveira, Iraq Veteran

Through the medium of an online interpretive exhibit, *War Ink* creates a virtual public space in which 24 California veterans share stories about their experiences of war and homecoming -- stories they have previously inscribed on their skin through the medium of tattoo artistry and whose meaning they are now reflecting upon and examining. These powerful testimonies about what it is like to go to war and to navigate the journey home open up a window onto the world of military culture, inviting visitors to make the simple but all-important decision to *listen* in order to begin to bridge the cultural gulf that exists between veterans and “the rest of us.” Creating connection through the storytelling “exchange”, *War Ink* ultimately offers an opportunity for community healing and empowerment, encouraging dialogue and opening up the possibility of understanding between two groups in American society that are increasingly separated.

The website (www.warink.org) is organized much like a traditional exhibit. A short video introduction provides an overview and immediately immerses the visitor in the exhibit, which is thematically organized in four chapters. Each examines a different dimension of the veteran experience through compelling verbal and visual stories: “We Were You” explores the variety of pathways that lead to enlistment; “Changed Forever” looks at the physical and psychological transformations undergone by warriors, both in preparation for and as a result of their service; “Living Scars” invites us to consider “what does it take to recover from war?” by reflecting on the enormity of losses these veterans have experienced; in the final chapter, “Living Not Surviving,” veterans share stories about their struggles to rejoin their families and communities and rebuild their lives after war.



www.warink.org

Told simply in everyday language, these stories explore unique as well as the universal aspects of the veteran experience. From the testimony of a young woman who found a home and family in the military she had never known before, to that of a young man who envisioned his feet “flying to heaven” after his convoy hit an explosive device, to the veteran who reveals a tattoo that memorializes the loss of his infant brother as well as a brother-in-arms who took his own life, the stories illuminate the meaning of comradeship, idealism, service, sacrifice, loss, disillusionment, love, sorrow, joy, and regret, along with forgiveness, redemption, and hope. Alternately poignant, ironic, angry, compassionate, and even humorous, they reveal the range and complexity of these veterans’ experiences.

A curatorial statement prefaces each chapter, providing visitors a lens for viewing, listening and reading the veteran’s stories, which are presented through the form of text, photos, and short audio and video interview recordings. The website was designed for legibility and navigational ease, and the design employs an aesthetic of simplicity, directness and clarity in keeping with the subject matter.

The website also presents biographies of contributors. Drawn from every part of California, these men and women of varied cultural and social backgrounds reflect the diversity of the state and its veteran population of over two million, the largest in the nation. Information about project staff, partners, and supporters is provided along with a statement of goals and objectives.

To promote dialogue, a comment section invites visitors to express their thoughts and a tab labeled “Your Role” encourages them to do their part to help veterans reunite with their communities:

“Veterans deserve to be embraced as the complex people that they are. They should feel supported by their communities, from the family, friends, neighbors, and co-workers who surround them. Support begins by really listening to a veteran talk about his or her experiences. Visiting War Ink is the start of that beginning.”

The Project Story

War Ink grew out of a collaboration between the project co-creators, veteran Jason Deitch and librarian Chris Brown, initiated in 2010 when Chris, a California State Library *Eureka!* Program Fellow, began searching for ways his Concord Branch of Contra Costa County Library could better serve the needs of veterans in this east San Francisco Bay Area community. Drawing upon the knowledge and insight provided by Jason, a former Army Ranger, medic and combat veteran turned social researcher and veteran advocate, Chris developed a number of library programs to help veterans navigate the transition to civilian life. One of these became the model for “Veteran Resource Centers” now housed in libraries across the state.

As much as they were concerned with addressing local veterans’ immediate need for information about obtaining housing, health care, education, and employment, Chris and Jason, who wrote his dissertation (UC Berkeley, Sociology) on veteran identity and post-service social reintegration, were mindful of veterans’ no less important needs to find meaning and make sense of their experience – and to address the sense of alienation from the rest of society felt by many, especially younger veterans. At the same time, they were increasingly aware of the degree to which war and the veteran experience have been pushed to margins of our national

consciousness, and how relatively few people know veterans of recent conflicts or have any experience of war. Bridging that gap, they both felt, was crucial to helping veterans successfully reintegrate into civilian life and to overcoming the gulf of experience and understanding between the general public and those who have served in the military. But how?

“An Authentic Medium”

The idea for the project came to Chris and Jason from their familiarity with the veteran community and culture, much conversation, and the insight that tattooing represented a form of storytelling, one in which words are made flesh. Gradually, over many discussions, a plan took shape: they would seek out, interview and photograph local veterans, eliciting stories about their *tattoos*. Tattooing is a form of creative expression and communication and a shared social art form widely practiced today, particularly by young people. Memorial tattooing has long been a practice associated with military service (hence the term, “War Ink”), and a mode of communication about norms and topics that can often not be spoken about freely. An *exhibit* would provide a way of elicit, record, and share these stories and publicly honor the veterans. At the same time, it would serve as a “conversation starter” -- a way to open up a *dialogue* between veterans and non-veterans. An *online exhibit* would make use of a medium that is particularly relevant to the current generation of veterans, and have the added benefit of being accessible to virtually anyone regardless of age, culture, or geographic location. The exhibit would have to be of *high quality* – the manner of presenting the stories would need to demonstrate respect both for them and the story sharers. Finally, it would need to illustrate the important function and role served by libraries as “*community living rooms*,” places where discussion, dialogue, and deeper connections between people of diverse backgrounds and experiences can be made, and where community memories and histories can be preserved and passed on.

The concept was a perfect match with Cal Humanities’ call for projects aligned with its *War Comes Home (WCH)* initiative, a multiyear, multifaceted effort to foster greater awareness and understanding of the veteran experience and encourage consideration of the impact of war on our communities. The *Community Stories* grants program, which supports accessible and engaging public humanities programs built around collecting and sharing first person narratives, offered Chris and Jason a means to realize their vision. With encouragement from Cal Humanities staff who they were already knew, having served as advisors on the selection of the book to anchor the related upcoming statewide read, another component of the *WCH* initiative, they requested support to gather and share verbal and visual stories from county veterans through an online exhibit. The review committee found their proposal “imaginative and compelling,” and awarded a \$10,000 grant to the library in November 2013.

We Want Your Story!

Almost immediately following the Cal Humanities award, the project took off. Chris’ grant writing skills and the Cal Humanities award attracted additional funders, among them Pacific Library Partners, the California State Library, and the Institute of Museum and Library Services. There was only one catch: the project had to have statewide reach.

Jason and Chris began to search for participants, contacting campus- and community-based veteran centers across the state, calling hundreds of tattoo shops, and making scouting trips to interview promising candidates. Over 30 public library systems across the state aided the effort by sharing information through flyers, word of mouth, social media, and online postings. Through these efforts, which often resulted in 18-hour days, by the end of June they had recruited 24 veterans representing 15 California counties and every branch of the armed services.

As the project snowballed, growing in scope and scale, Chris and Jason remained committed to the high standard of artistic and technical quality they originally envisioned. Their hopes were boosted when StoryCorps, whom Chris had approached earlier, agreed to conduct the interviews and archive the recorded stories at the Library of Congress as part of their Military Voices Initiative. With the help of Karen Kraft of Veterans and Film and Television, who was captivated by the concept and took on the role of advocate and producer, the team connected with members of California’s media and entertainment industry community who offered their assistance.

In late July 2014, the veteran story-sharers Jason had “shepherded” during the past months assembled at the Concord Vet Center. Over four days, StoryCorps producers recorded their stories, while photographer Johann Wolf and filmmaker Rebecca Murga, herself an OEF/OIF veteran, documented the vets and their tattoos from behind their cameras. Chris and Jason described the experience as “life-changing”: “Witnessing the bravery of these veterans in being willing to entrust their stories to us and to make public their deepest feelings and thoughts was incredibly moving – it showed tremendous courage as well as the depth of their desire to connect with other people and move forward with their lives.”



*War Ink participants, staff, and supporters at the launch event in Oakland, November 11, 2014.
Photo by C. Torres*

Over the remainder of the summer and fall, Chris and Jason, who also served as the project’s Humanities Advisor, reviewed the stories and images that had been collected. Aided by curatorial and content advisors Barbara Henry and Sarah P. Morris, they further developed the exhibit themes and made difficult choices about what to include and what to leave out. Meanwhile, Favorite Medium, an Oakland–based new media company, was at work designing a one-of-a-kind website, while Brown·Miller Communications, Inc., another Bay Area firm, crafted and began to implement the publicity plan.

“... thank you...for getting it, for letting us tell our stories in our way.”

The website launched on November 11, 2014 – Veterans Day – with a celebration in Oakland that coincided with the California Library Association’s annual conference. Veterans, librarians, and project supporters and contributors cheered, and not a few wiped away tears, as they viewed the website for the first time. Related events were hosted by Contra Costa Library and Bay Area library partners, drawing thousands of local veterans and community members and receiving widespread local notice.

Within a few weeks, the project had attracted thousands of visitors and received national media coverage from NPR, *The Washington Post*, *Newsweek*, the *New York Times*, military publications, and other outlets. In total, more than 150 news outlets covered the launch of the exhibit, with a collective print or broadcast impression figure of 10,737,994 and a collective web impression of 18,399,201 daily visits. To date, the exhibit has received over 41,000 visits. The trailer has been viewed more than 23,000 times, and the exhibit has logged more than 18,000 social media engagements.

The project has also garnered a number of impressive awards, including a John Cotton Dana Award from the Library Leadership and Management Association (an American Library Association affiliate), one of only eight awards made annually to libraries for outstanding effective strategic communication campaigns. It was nominated and selected as a finalist for a Webby (the web equivalent of an Emmy) winning third place in the cultural institutions category, and won an Interactive Media Award, from the Interactive Media Council, Inc. (IMC), a nonprofit organization of leading web designers, developers, programmers, advertisers and other web-related professionals which recognizes the highest standards of excellence in website design and development.

The story-telling experience created by this project provided direct benefits to the veteran participants, who forged connections and developed relationships of trust and care. Several expressed the sentiment that sharing their stories has given them clarity and helped them come to terms with their service experiences. As Jason noted, “For some, it’s meant they can now step outside the darkness that occupied their lives and see that life after war is possible.” For others, it was a way to recapture the best part of their military experience: the sense of group camaraderie. One even got a tattoo of the *War Ink* logo as a way of signifying the importance of his participation in the project.

Veterans who have visited the exhibit have expressed appreciation, many commenting that it has voiced feelings and thoughts they had not been able to express. For others, it has been an affirmation that they are not alone: *“Words cannot describe the feeling of normalcy my heart has right now after seeing your video on the wounded warrior project FB page... I wish I could have been part of that story, but I just want to say thank you so much for such a wonderful, inspiring and REAL organization.... I just want to thank you for making me feel normal again. God Bless you!”*

Non-veterans who have visited the website have commented on its power as well. For some, it offered a first-time opportunity to actually listen to real veterans talk about their experience. Generally, the impact appears to be that which was hoped for – revelatory – leading to increased understanding, knowledge, and compassion that may lead, immediately or over time, to action.

Last but not least has been the impact on the library community, within which Chris and Jason have achieved a status close to rock stars, along with wide appreciation for Chris’ professional leadership. Librarians have enthusiastically embraced the project, recognizing its potential to transform library programming and public perceptions of libraries while reaffirming the values

and contributions they make to American cultural and society. In the words of one: “... *thank you especially for representing the profession so well and continuing to dispel the stereotype in the wide world of the internet and of non-library users of librarians as boring dusty people.*”

Since the launch, Chris has become Deputy Director of Santa Clara County Library System and Jason now holds an appointment as a researcher at the Program in Rehabilitation Neuroscience at UCSF, UC Berkeley, and the Martinez VA Clinic. In addition to maintaining connections with the group of 24 veterans and their families the project brought together, they are exploring possibilities to extend the project, perhaps through a traveling physical exhibit, a documentary film, or a series of web-based episodes.

An Exemplary Project

Beyond the project’s reach and visibility, its impact on multiple audiences, and the high level of technical quality, professionalism, and attention to detail it manifests, *War Ink* exemplifies best practices in public humanities programming that might provide touchstones for other council-supported community-initiated projects.

More Is More: The Value of Partnership

By assembling an improbable “coalition of the willing” of public and private funders, tattoo parlors, veteran-serving organizations, libraries, campuses, and media professionals, the project brought together an exceptional array of partners. Connections were forged not only with traditional humanities organizations (a state council, a State Library, a statewide network of public libraries, StoryCorps, and museum professionals) but with non-traditional partners (veteran organizations, tattoo parlors, and for-profit media, entertainment, and communications firms and professionals) as well. Although time-consuming and labor-intensive, often requiring expert negotiating skills and patience, the care and effort Chris and Jason put into developing these collaborations paid off mightily, enabling the project to engage participants, obtain high caliber of artistic and technical services, and reach audiences well beyond those initially expected. These relationships also enabled the project to leverage the \$10,000 grant from Cal Humanities’ into a project with a total budget, including in-kind donations and pro-bono services, close to \$500,000 – nearly fifty times the initial investment.

Of course, the project would not have been possible without the relationship of trust and respect Chris and Jason developed and built over many years, the unique set of experiences and skills each contributed, as well as the relationships they were able to establish with the 24 veterans who chose to contribute their stories to *War Ink*.

Make No Little Plans

One of the remarkable characteristics of this project is the boldness that guided it from the earliest stages to completion. The project creators’ passionate desire to elicit and share the veterans’ stories with the rest of the community, and to do so in a way that would be compelling, engaging, and relevant to participants and audiences alike, never wavered. Their commitment to the project “mission” gave them the energy, confidence, and determination to go to extraordinary lengths to ensure its success and to confront the inevitable roadblocks they met with good humor and a positive spirit.

In reflecting about the project with Cal Humanities staff, Jason referred several times to Chris’ “audacity”, perseverance, and tenacity in securing support for an unconventional and innovative project within the fairly traditional realm of public library programming. As they both noted, one of the things people find most surprising about the project is that it was initiated by a public

library. “People usually don’t think of libraries as being at the cutting-edge of cultural programming, but this project showed what libraries and librarians can do when they really pay attention to their communities and are willing to take risks and be adventurous.”

By stepping outside the comfort zone in which many humanities organizations (councils as well as academic and community-based institutions) often operate, and daring to tackle an “edgy” subject and execute an ambitious project, *War Ink* has shown what it possible to achieve through public humanities programming.

Opening Minds and Hearts

War Ink reaffirms something humanities councils already know full well: story-based programs not only have broad reach and public appeal, they open up lines of communication, enabling communities to face difficult topics and allowing voices from the margins to be included in civic dialogue. *War Ink* is notable in the way that it has enabled its veteran participants to share their experiences in an authentic and genuine manner. What is even more impressive is that it has done so through a compelling and engaging format which has amplified the audience for the project, enabling the entire nation to hear these voices.

Making use of the traditional humanities practices of telling and listening to stories and reflecting on their meaning, the project directors hoped to dispel feelings of isolation and estrangement held by this group of veterans and promote their reconnection to the rest of society. At the same time, it hoped that sharing these stories would provide a learning experience for the public, promoting thoughtful reflection and analysis as well as empathy. Comments from visitors and observers seem to show that *War Ink* has opened minds as well as hearts to the complexities and realities of the veteran experience, giving the public a deeper understanding of what it means to go to war and come home. In a democratic society, citizens have the right as well as the responsibility to be informed about civic matters and decisions that are made in their names. The insights offered by these veterans may ultimately influence how the public as well as decision makers understand these issues and what choices they make.

Already, one concrete change has resulted from the project. Accordingly to a recent article in the [*Washington Post*](#), by raising awareness and deepening the understanding of members of the military establishment, *War Ink* has helped promote modification on of the Department of the Army’s official policy regarding tattooing.

In conclusion, Cal Humanities hopes that the committee will join us in recognizing the extraordinary accomplishments of the project and the entire project team, in particular the project co-creators Chris Brown and Jason Deitch and the Contra Costa Public Library. For further information, please contact Julie Fry, President and CEO, Cal Humanities, at jfry@calhum.org

“Most veterans welcome the opportunity to share their stories. And when they do, then... listen. Really listen. Don't use the conversation as an opportunity for telling your own story or voicing your opinions. Just be open and respectful. “