

The Write to Heal: *Transforming Pain Through Art* (Episode 3)

Interview with Brooke Dickhart, Executive Director of The Joel Fund and Linda Giles, retired social worker with the Department of Social Work at Womack Army Medical Center

[00:00:00] **Tamara Kissane:** Are you compelled to write, whether it be journaling, poetry, or stories to help make sense of your life and your world? I'm Tamara Kissane, the founder of Artist Soapbox. In this limited audio series writer and teacher June Guralnick and I speak with life changers - people who champion creative writing as a catalyst for healing, and soldiers whose lives have been radically transformed through story.

In this episode, you'll hear from Brooke Dickhart, the Executive Director of the Joel Fund, a North Carolina organization serving military members and their families through inspiring outreach programs such as Operation Art, and Linda Giles, a Gestalt therapist who has worked transformatively with veterans for many decades.

Check out our show notes for more information about Brooke and Linda's backgrounds, along with a link to the heart-touching digital story Brooke created in memory of her father, a former Navy Seal. We hope you enjoy this conversation about the power of storytelling to inspire connection and healing, and do stay to the end because we have a provocative writing prompt we're inviting you, our listener, to sink your teeth into.

[00:01:16] **June Guralnick:** Greetings, Brooke Dickhart, I am so glad to have this opportunity to talk with you today about The Joel Fund and about your life creating this amazing organization. First, I'd like to turn it over to Tamara, cause she's going to start the ball rolling.

[00:01:33] **Tamara Kissane:** What inspired you to create The Joel Fund and who does the Joel Fund serve?

[00:01:39] **Brooke Dickhart:** I started The Joel Fund in honor of my dad. He was a Navy SEAL for 20 years, from 1964 to 1984, and he did four tours in Vietnam. He was on SEAL Team Two, but he was also a plank owner, which is an original member of Seal Team Six. In 2014, he passed away after a long battle with PTSD. And so we started this organization to give back to the veteran community and to help other families so they didn't have to go through what we went through.

The second part of your question, the people we serve, we serve really anyone who has served our country, if it's the reserves, active duty, national Guard, veterans, and their immediate family members. I would also love to say that the art program that we offer is also in honor of my dad because art was something that we shared.

My mom used to always tell me, you get your art skills from your dad. My dad used art to heal. He would draw, he did sculpture, he painted, and so art was a way that he expressed himself. And with his line of work, he was gone nine months a year. Sometimes he was gone for years at a time, depending on where he was stationed. So that was a way I always felt very connected to him.

[00:02:53] **June Guralnick:** I'd like to talk just a little bit more about your dad and the art he created because I've been privileged, thanks to you for sharing a little bit of your dad's artwork with me - and the images are striking and haunting and unforgettable.

[00:03:09] **Brooke Dickhart:** I truly believe that the majority of his art were the images that haunted him. His condo, there was a wall and it was the length of a family room and a dining room. Very long. And floor to ceiling were these faces, these very dark faces. And as a child, I mean, I was afraid of them because I didn't understand. And what I have learned since he passed away, that those were truly the images that haunted him.

He lost four of his buddies right before he got out. I believe that was the catalyst to him getting out of the military. He didn't believe the mission should run and resulted in four deaths that I think stuck with him forever. He would draw those and it was very, very dark. I mean, you could see the pain that he was going through.

[00:03:57] **Tamara Kissane:** Brooke, why did you name your nonprofit The Joel Fund?

[00:04:01] **Brooke Dickhart:** The Joel Fund - yes, it's in honor of my dad, but the reason we call it The Joel Fund, is I think he tried to escape who he was in the military, but it was also his artist's pseudonym. So all of his art that I have is signed Joel. All of his friends later in life called him Joel.

I knew him as Joe. He was Joseph, you know, but Joel was who he was the second half of his life. So, you know, I try to do things the way he would have wanted them done and, and that is why we call it The Joel Fund.

[00:04:30] **Tamara Kissane:** Why did you decide to add creative writing to the visual arts classes the Joel Fund offered?

[00:04:35] **Brooke Dickhart:** The reason we started the writing class was because of my dad - I have yellow pages where my dad tried to write his story and he couldn't, and there's cuss words where he is like, you know, I can't get this out of my head. He just was not able to do it. And so I said, if he can't, there's got to be others who can't. And that is why we started the writing class. So anytime I get to share his story, it's an honor. So thank you.

[00:05:00] **June Guralnick:** Talking about you creating art - again, I was very privileged to be part of a workshop with you where you created one of the most beautiful digital stories I've ever seen, and I don't know if you'd like to just talk a little bit about the process of creating this artwork in honor of your father.

[00:05:20] **Brooke Dickhart:** The first thing I will say is that it gave me a very deep appreciation for writers, because I am not one, and I struggled with it. After I lost my dad, I created a slideshow. I sat down and I went through pictures and I poured everything into that slideshow, but even that wasn't as hard as it was for me to write this story.

Because for so long there was guilt. I can finally say the guilt is gone. We're doing so much good that that is no longer the driving force behind what we do. But that guilt was in that digital story and I struggled with it. It was a very difficult thing for me to write. And then to put the digital stories, you know, the way they put the images and the sound to them, takes them to a whole other level. It brings the person into it in a completely different way, and it was unlike anything I have ever attempted to do. I appreciate your kind words in what you say about it. Because I look at it and I don't see that. I see just the rawness of my emotion in it. So that's where I struggle with it.

[00:06:31] **Tamara Kissane:** Brooke, I think this would be a great time for our listeners to hear your digital story.

[00:06:42] **Brooke Dickhart:** Whenever I look out over the ocean, I think of my dad and I smile. A wave of peace washes over me. My mom raised me to live a life without regret. Her brother was an A six pilot. He graduated from the Naval Academy and was killed practicing a bombing run over the Mediterranean Sea. She used to say to me, if you love someone, tell them, because you never know when they may be gone.

I have done a pretty good job of living my life without regret until I lost my dad. My dad and I had some great times together. He introduced me to different languages and cultures. He taught me about the world outside of my world. And most importantly, he taught me about service and sacrifice. My dad was gone most of my childhood and he never missed the important milestones.

He was at my high school graduation, my college graduation, my wedding, and he even had the opportunity to meet all three of his grandchildren. For a long time I lived with a regret, but that regret wasn't about my relationship with my dad. That regret was that I didn't know more and truly understand what he was going through. I didn't understand his PTSD or his use of drugs and alcohol to numb his pain.

My dad chose the ocean as his final resting place. Arlington just wasn't for him. At the sunrise ceremony where so many of his brothers had gone before him, we gathered to say goodbye. His name was announced followed by the tolling of a bell.

The folded flag placed in my lap and the Captain's salute were almost too much for me to bear. Turning on his heel in the sand, he gave a final salute to signify that the time to lay my dad to rest was close. As I watched my dad's ashes being carried into the ocean by his brother-in-arms, I knew that he was finally at peace and at that moment I decided not to let my regret hold me down, but to use it to serve others like us.

As was written to me by one of my dad's brothers-in-arms after he died, another legacy inserts under the Pearly Gate. We have the watch. Fair winds and following seas, mate - you will be missed by those who are never out of the fight. Long live the brotherhood. Dad, I will see you on the flip side.

[00:09:38] **June Guralnick:** Well, I just say again, it's an extraordinarily moving, honest-to-the-bone piece of work that tells such an impactful story, both not just of your dad, but the motivation behind creating an important organization like The Joel Fund.

[00:09:57] **Tamara Kissane:** So along those lines, how does participation in the arts help veterans, active duty and family? That's what I'm curious about.

[00:10:06] **Brooke Dickhart:** For us in the way we introduce these men and women to art,, it's more about creating community. We often say that art is the vehicle, but when I look back, what my dad went through, you know, they say hindsight's twenty-twenty, right? If I had known then what I know now, his

isolation would've been one of the first things that I would've been able to note and help him with. So we try to create that sense of community and our instructors, like June and Linda and the others have been so successful in doing that, that we have veterans who - I always share this story because I think it really speaks to what we try to do - one of our veterans was diagnosed with cancer while he was taking our photography class.

The group had been together for several months and they rallied around him and they took him meals and they drove him to doctor's appointments and did things for him that he didn't have before that class. That's an amazing benefit of these classes. You know, we're teaching these men and women the therapeutic benefits of art.

It's not art therapy, but we want them to find the beauty in everyday life. It's the community aspect of it that's vital because they need to be with their peers and they need to be able to share their experiences with people who get it. And that's not just the veterans or the active duty service members, but also the family members because they have a level of understanding.

[00:11:32] **June Guralnick:** Talking a little bit more about that. So how do you think the arts heal?

[00:11:37] **Brooke Dickhart:** It's being able to express yourself without using words. And I hate to even say that since you're a writing instructor, but I do think that sometimes, like that digital story for me, it was the hardest thing for me to ever do.

The slideshow was a piece of cake - I didn't put words to that. But sometimes people just aren't able to do that, and so having other options, whether it's photography or drawing or painting, to be able to express that without actually having to use words, it's just, it's powerful. And teaching them and giving them that skillset, that tool in their toolbox, is very powerful in their healing.

[00:12:11] **June Guralnick:** I understand that so completely and for me, words are not words that are empty - words that people just say, hi, how are you today? Words in the context of arts for healing become these beautiful balloons that can carry emotions across great distances.

Brooke Dickhart: I love that.

[00:12:30] **Tamara Kissane:** You were talking about family members getting it.

Active duty and veterans get it. What does 'get it' mean? What are they getting? What kinds of shared understandings might they have?

[00:12:44] **Brooke Dickhart:** It can be as little as understanding the deals you get at the commissary to as significant and impactful as family life when a service member is deployed. The whole gamut of that life. Everything in between the experiences that a military child goes through versus a civilian child. Having your parent deploy - that fear of where they are, what they're doing, are they safe? Especially in today's world where everything is on the news or on social media, those families understand that stress. And they understand, you know, living on bases or every little nuance about that style of life.

[00:13:32] **June Guralnick:** So this is a hard question to ask. I know you've had also some challenges attracting veterans and family members and active duty to take arts-related classes. Because sometimes when folks hear art they go, no, I can't do that. That's not for me. I don't know anything about art with the big A. So what kinds of things do you do to address that?

[00:13:53] **Brooke Dickhart:** I think it's a matter of who we work with. I have this conversation a lot. You know, this is a demographic that pushes art away. I think that trying to overcome that hurdle has, yes, been a huge struggle for us. But what I'm seeing is that if they come referred by their therapist or their physician, they're more likely to try it. Another thing is if they have one of their buddies from their time in the service. You know, we have several of our veterans who talk nonstop about how much they love our art classes.

So it takes, you know, word of mouth. My hope one day with this, June, is that, and I have told this to the higher ups at the VA, my hope one day is that when a therapist gives a script for medicine, they also give a script for an art class.

[00:14:40] **June Guralnick:** Brooke, I have not a moment's doubt that this wonderful organization you created is changing lives for the better. And it's thanks to you and your vision and I will say unending energy to keep it moving forward.

[00:14:59] **Brooke Dickhart:** And our amazing team, you guys are a part of that. We appreciate that. We could never, ever do it without this team, this amazing team that we have.

[00:15:08] **Tamara Kissane:** Yes, and let's now welcome Linda Giles, who has been working with June in the writing classes as a kind of emotional safety valve for the veterans.

[00:15:18] **June Guralnick:** Linda. Linda, I'm so, so glad to have you here and have the opportunity to talk to one of the wisest, most wonderful women with the biggest heart I've ever had the privilege of knowing. I think I'd like to start by having you just chat a little bit about your background and what drew you to become a therapist.

[00:15:44] **Linda Giles:** I was a baby born during World War II, and my father had to go to that war because I was born 15 days too late for him to be exempt, and I never knew that until I was in my sixties. He kept that a secret from me because he thought maybe I would feel guilty that I didn't come earlier. Anyway, I had my father, seven uncles and one aunt in that war.

That war shaped me, and I noticed that not everybody loved the way my parents loved each other and loved us. And I think that was a big part of that childhood was they not only talked and used words for love, but they lived it in action. They were good to their neighbors no matter what.

[00:16:33] **Tamara Kissane:** So Linda, I'm wondering how you ended up working with active duty folks and veterans, and you mentioned that the war shaped you as a child. How did you end up with this particular demographic?

[00:16:46] **Linda Giles:** Well, I had worked with battered women in domestic violence and abused children most of my career. In fact, I worked for 49 years from '64 to 2013. And because of my willingness to work with men who had gotten in trouble with domestic violence and do some experimental programs in Cleveland, both with the Justice Center and with a group of other providers who were willing to do assessments, the military was interested in my background - and so they would try to recruit me several times in all the branches. But it wasn't until after my father turned 90 and he was in a nursing home and he had flashbacks, because he heard a woman screaming at night and he thought he was back in Europe and somebody was raping the woman. And then because of my background and his learning about all of this from me in dealing with domestic violence, because that's trauma also, he was willing to go into a support group and work with the psychiatrists to deal with this.

And also right after that 9-11 happened and my husband, who was 64 at the time. Because he was Egyptian, he volunteered for our military and they took him in as a contractor with the Special Forces and he knew the language and the

culture. So they sent him over to Hungary where he was preparing to go into Iraq as a US citizen.

He valued his freedom and his citizenship and he always celebrated it every day. So those two men influenced me until I finally said yes to the Army and decided to come to Fort Bragg. And that was in 2006.

[00:18:30] **June Guralnick:** I'd like to get your thoughts on how you think the arts can be a tool for wellness, and perhaps, let's use the word - even a tool for healing with the populations you've served.

[00:18:43] **Linda Giles:** Well, in thinking about this question I was remembering when I studied the existential philosophers and also the fact that I'm a Gestalt trained therapist and existentialism is part of that training because, We're looking at the meaning of life and we're creating experiences for the client so that they could come to their own conclusions about them rather than us telling them.

And I just thought, wow, that is so important to this whole healing - for people to express themselves in art, in all the arts. And so many, like when I worked with the children at Fort Bragg, many of them didn't have the words to put to their feelings, just like the men who never learned to do that. And so using art therapy to get them to express themselves so that they could figure out what was going on and then put words to it was an important part of that. And there was just a natural healing.

[00:19:45] **Tamara Kissane:** Could you give a few examples of how the practice of writing has been impactful for veterans that you and June work with?

[00:19:54] **Linda Giles:** I recently wrote a piece recommending her for her medal that she got last week, and I referred to her as a healer and a shaman because of the way she works with the class; just with the way she listens, the prompt she uses, and how it creates that awareness of themselves that they're more than their experiences in the military, that they had this a whole other life and that they are so much more than that.

[00:20:24] **June Guralnick:** Let me ask you this follow up question. When we express difficult and challenging emotions through the written word, what do you think happens?

[00:20:36] **Linda Giles:** Well, it's a release. It's a release and then when they're releasing it and they're sharing it with the group and nobody falls out of their

face or off their chair and responds differently and accepting and then there's the sharing of other people's experience. I mean, that creates healing in itself. I mean, there is these horrific things that happen in life. We all suffer, but we don't have to keep on suffering after it's over. We can heal and move beyond it so that we can live a healthy life and not be stuck in that horrific thing that happened to us.

[00:21:15] **June Guralnick:** You use a tool, I've seen you use it quite often. I guess the best word for it is visualizations, but it is psychophysical work that you do. Why do you use that and how do you think that's effective?

[00:21:27] **Linda Giles:** Well, first of all, I usually start with breath because I think breath is one of the most wonderful things. It's free and it's something that we do naturally and it's so healing, and if we can get people to do it in a rhythmic manner regularly, it could be so healing. And then when you combine it with visualization, it helps for them to get to a safe place, whether they go to the beach or the mountains or someplace in the woods or wherever they went as a child maybe, so that they can feel safe in a moment.

And I'd like to talk about grounding too, because it's so important in this day and age - we're in our heads so much it's important to get into our bodies and to get our feet on the ground and feel rooted in the earth. It's just healing in itself, like getting out and walking in nature, taking what I call forest baths. So it's amazing what we can do with our imagination. So that's why I use the visualization, trying to get people to know that they can use that so that they can go to that safe place.

[00:22:35] **Tamara Kissane:** Now, Linda, it sounds like you've shared so much, you've taught so much and witnessed a lot of very important moments for folks, but I'm curious about what you personally have learned from working with veterans through expressive writing. I know you've written a piece titled *Extraordinarily Ordinary*. How about reading a selection from that personal story that I think speaks to this question?

[00:23:02] **Linda Giles:** I became a warrior soldier of a different sort. I have taken my knowledge base, my experience, and my choices, and wove them into a tapestry of who I've become. I learned courage, inner strength, resilience, caretaking, self-care, as well as love and sacrifice from the women in my family. I learned the value of service, sacrifice and unconditional love from my father.

I learned the art of sharing from my siblings. I learned the value of freedom and choice from my husband. I learned about the endurance of the human soul and its hope from all those who have crossed my path. I learned from my soldiers the importance of their healing to wholeness so that they could live their best life as extraordinary citizens.

Writing has given me a way of seeing the woman I have become. The tapestry I have woven allows me to see my need to step back into my power, realizing I am not done. I choose to keep on keeping on. I must change my paradigm on aging and perfection. All my imperfections provide good experience for my learning.

I am an extraordinarily ordinary human being. That's me.

Tamara Kissane: Thank you, Linda.

[00:24:35] **June Guralnick:** For the people listening today who haven't engaged in any direct arts experiences and would like to start, is there any advice you could give folks, a sharing of an idea of how to start using art as a tool for healing?

[00:24:56] **Linda Giles:** Get some watercolors and start painting. Join a music group and start singing. Find an instrument and learn how to play. Join a dance class and learn how to dance, even if it's square dancing or line dancing. But do something for fun. Get out and be social. Share a cup of coffee with somebody. Greet somebody standing in the grocery line behind you or in front of you. Be open. Be accepting. Drop the judgments. Just learn to be.

[00:25:31] **June Guralnick:** Linda, it has been such a pleasure to have this opportunity to talk with you. You are a woman who inspires others to heal and to embrace joy in life. And it has been my honor and pleasure to work with you these three years. So thank you.

[00:25:51] **Linda Giles:** You're welcome. And I thank you. It's been great partnering with you.

[00:26:00] **Tamara Kissane:** Wow. We heard a lot today about the healing power of telling your own story. What did you hear? What did you take away from this conversation that's still turning in your mind? In the spirit of this series, The Write to Heal, we invite you to respond to this prompt: *What adventure haven't you taken that's burning inside you and could change your life? What has prevented you from embarking on this adventure?*

Take a moment to jot down whatever comes to mind. No need to edit yourself. Just let it flow. And if you're willing, we'd love to hear your thoughts and writings. You can share them by sending to artistsoapbox@gmail.com with the subject heading, The Write to Heal.

The Write to Heal: Soldiers Deep Dive into Storytelling is a production of artist soapbox in partnership with June Guralnick. This series is dedicated in memory of David Brave Heart, whose inspiring music graces our introduction and closing sections with additional music by Louis Wilkinson. The intro montage is sound engineered by Royce Froehlich with post-production by Jasmine Hunjan and Tamara Kissane.

For more information, including the list of writers who contributed to our opening montage, please see the show notes, catch us on social media, or visit our websites: artistsoapbox.org and juneguralnick.com.