

The Write to Heal: *Our Minds are Still There*

(Episode 4)

Interview with Gail Ashby Bryant (Army veteran 1975-1981), Mark Bartholomew (Iraq Combat Medic veteran), and Bill Dixon (Vietnam veteran and Board Chair of Vets to Vets)

[00:00:00] **Tamara Kissane:** Welcome to The Write to Heal: Soldiers Deep Dive into Storytelling.. Are you compelled to write stories, poems, or keep a journal to help make sense of your life? 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 writing as a catalyst for healing, and soldiers whose lives have been radically transformed through story.

In this episode, you'll hear from three veterans: Bill Dixon, a Vietnam War Army veteran and current board chairman for Vets to Vets United, as well as a board member of Vietnam Veterans of America; Gail Ashby Bryant served in the Army Security Agency and the New York Army Reserves from 1975 through 1981 and was the first female Mess Sergeant at Fort Drum Summer Camp Training; and Mark Bartholomew served in the US Army Reserves between 2000 and 2008 and was an Iraq Combat Medic between 2003 to 2004.

Check out our show notes for more information about their backgrounds, along with a link to their digital stories. 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.

[00:01:32] **June Guralnick:** Good morning Bill, Mark, Gail. Good morning! Wonderful to see you and have this opportunity to talk with you this morning about your journey in life and the incredible writing that you all do. I thought we'd begin by having each of you say just a little something about yourself, about your background, where you grew up, and I'd also like you to talk a little bit about how your military service impacted your life. So Bill, how about we start with you?

[00:01:59] **Bill Dixon:** My hometown was Wilson, North Carolina. Started out on a farm and we moved to the big city of Wilson, which was some three thousand people at the time. I've been married now, let's see, 58 years. I am a Vietnam veteran. Joined the Army to beat the draft in 1965. Went to Vietnam in '67... I guess it was '66 when I joined the army. Went to Vietnam in '67, came back in '68. Was stationed at Fort Hood, Texas for a while. Then I came home

and have been right here in North Carolina since. Done a lot of different things. I was in construction and home design for quite some time.

[00:02:34] **June Guralnick:** Thank you, Bill. Gail, what about you?

[00:02:37] **Gail Ashby Bryant:** My name is Gail Ashby Bryant, and I like to describe myself as a Harlem girl from a Harlem world. Born in Harlem, New York, now residing as a retired grandma veteran in Cary, North Carolina. I was a social worker by trade and I like to say a chef in the army. Right now, I'm just enjoying my retirement and I'm enjoying my life by just writing and reminiscing and just kind of putting myself together for all these years.

[00:03:17] **June Guralnick:** Mark, what about you?

[00:03:18] **Mark Bartholomew:** My name's Mark Bartholomew. I grew up in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, which is the eastern part of the state. Joined the Army in 2000 - well, the Army reserves in 2000 as a combat medic, and I was deployed in 2003 to Iraq. Spent 17 months on deployment and came home with PTSD and a TBI and kind of bounced around from place to place until I was placed on one hundred percent disability, and now I'm lucky enough to be a stay-at-home dad.

[00:03:50] **Tamara Kissane:** Mark, can you talk about when you first started writing and what compelled you to write?

[00:03:57] **Mark Bartholomew:** When I was a little, little kid, I wanted to be a writer for a while, and I wrote off and on growing up and had some stuff published, a few local things in high school and then, you know, I quit writing for a long time, and with the TBI, it made things difficult, so I just left it alone. After my divorce, I started trying to find myself again, and I found The Joel Fund and started writing again. It's been great to step back into being creative.

[00:04:25] **Tamara Kissane:** Thank you, Bill, can you talk about how it feels to write your stories and share them with other people?

[00:04:31] **Bill Dixon:** To me, it's very rewarding, plus very therapeutic. For me to actually sit down and put my story on paper, it gives me an opportunity to reach inside of myself. I have depression. Depression is a strange thing. It's probably the world's greatest perpetual emotion machine, and it's been a battle to getting back to doing the creative things that I enjoyed doing as I was coming along. So writing is an opportunity for me to get back to doing some creative work.

[00:05:02] **June Guralnick:** Thank you, Bill. You have helped so many veterans over these years, so I just want to recognize what you continue to do, what you have done to help other people.

[00:05:13] **Bill Dixon:** Thank you. All of that helps me, you know?

[00:05:16] **June Guralnick:** Let me ask this question to all of you. I don't know, just somebody jump in and speak out about it. How has your understanding of yourself changed as a result of writing?

[00:05:27] **Gail Ashby Bryant:** I think that when I used to write, before we started working together, I would just write fantasies or I would say just surface things. It would be about my life, but I never put in, as you would say, June, that skin in the game. And after I started writing with you, I started giving a pound of flesh and I started writing inside me, what was really deep inside me, and I started writing what was my truth. Instead of thinking, well, if I write about myself and my life, then the people who read it, that know me, what are they going to think about me?

[00:06:18] **June Guralnick:** Gail, this might be a really good time for you to read *Whammy*, because that piece for me comes from your heart and soul.

[00:06:27] **Gail Ashby Bryant:** Okay. Whammy. My baby sister died when she was 58 years old, one year younger than my mother. When she died, when my baby sister passed, death took on another meaning. It seeps into your soul as black smoke shaped like the grim reaper. It scoops out all your good memories and feelings, and crushes you in a misery you have never felt before.

The first to die of seven siblings, technically, as the youngest, she should have been the last. This death was unexpected and unnecessary. I still wonder could she have been saved and could I have saved her? Seven of seven had to be a lucky baby. Seven was, after all, a lucky number. I was the first of the siblings to hold her, kiss her, feed her, change her and love her.

Her name was Cassandra Arlene Ashby. Such a big name for a small baby. Seven kids under the age of ten would have had a hard time saying that name. And so our grandmother with her knack for giving out cool nicknames named her Whammy because Grammy said she was wild, wild, wild, all day and all night. Unless she was being held and I took that great honor for myself.

Whatever I did, she did. We were inseparable. We walked alike, we talked alike, and we looked alike. We went to the same schools and colleges. We partied and

we drank. We both aspired to become teachers. She did. I didn't. I went into the Army instead. We separated and came back together. When I was discharged, we separated again.

When we each got married, we came together every chance we got. She drank more. I drank less. The longer we separated, the more she drank. We separated for ten years because of her cruel husband. She had a dirty little secret. A week before she died, her son called me and asked: "Auntie, why is mother dear trying to drink herself to death?"

She had cirrhosis of the liver, and so she died. Suddenly, a final separation, unforeseen, unimaginable, a death that could have been prevented.

[00:09:23] **June Guralnick:** So Gail, I know how hard that piece was for you to write. After you wrote it, how did it change you to write that piece?

[00:09:31] **Gail Ashby Bryant:** When I wrote that piece, you know, it kind of freed me. People always talk about closure and just being able to accept what the result of things are. And after I wrote it, it was hard. It was hard. You know, guys, I cried all through it, but after I wrote it, I felt good and I felt that it was a piece that I would always be able to honor my sister with and remember her with.

[00:10:02] **June Guralnick:** It's such a beautiful piece, and the digital story you created around that piece is striking.

[00:10:07] **Tamara Kissane:** I'm wondering, is writing important to your ongoing health and wellness?

[00:10:13] **Bill Dixon:** One of the things I've gotten out of writing is clarity. I understand myself more- and am able to fight off the depression and the post-traumatic stress. I will tell June that there are times I wondered about her - cause sometimes the prompts that she would give us, I would sit there and go, what in the world has she got on her mind? Where is she going with this? But it always worked out and gave us all, I think, more clarity. It just fit right in perfectly and it always worked out and made so much difference in our writing and so forth.

[00:10:44] **June Guralnick:** Oh, Bill, I thank you so much for those very kind words. I think this would be a really great time if you're willing to read *My Longest Trip*.

[00:10:51] **Bill Dixon:** Okay. *My Longest Trip*. I had finished basic training, was finishing Army engineering school. When I received orders to report to the Republic of South Vietnam, I kissed my wife goodbye and got on the plane - my very first plane ride. I had so much apprehension. Would my wife be okay? What was war like? What was Vietnam like? Did I have in me what it took to fight in a war? What would I be doing during my year in Vietnam? Would I survive my year in Vietnam? Would the plane crash? I'm going off to a war in a country I know nothing about kept repeating itself in my mind. Upon landing in California, they herded us onto a bus and off we went to Travis Air Force Base.

Hey, that's not fair, we are flying on a military plane, sitting backwards facing our duffle bags. You could see all the wires and cables. Everyone I had known going to Vietnam flew on commercial planes with cute flight attendants; our flight attendant was called Loadmaster and he definitely was not cute.

We flew and then flew some more. It was a dark, stormy night - a lot like the mood inside. The pilot did not help the mood. As we were bouncing around in the storm, he came on the intercom and said, "We are having plane trouble and we are going down. We'll be landing on Wake Island." As the plane landed, all I saw was runway, water and a raging storm.

There were cots set up for us to sleep on for the night in a big open hanger. I don't think there was much sleeping. They worked on the plane all night and at dawn, we got on again to land on Guam. There they worked on the plane another four hours - and off we go again. After a while, the pilot came back on his intercom: "We are now in Vietnam airspace and we'll be landing at Bien Hoa airbase in the Republic of Vietnam when we stop. Get your ass in gear, grab a duffle bag and get off my plane quickly. The Viet Cong like to welcome new arrivals to Vietnam by mortaring the runway as they land."

We came straight down, hit the ground hard, bounced a few times, and rushed down the runway. Made a quick turn and stopped. The pilot started yelling. "Get your crap off my plane now!" When that plane door opened, everyone paused. The sudden thick sticky humidity, heat, and stink came in and hit us with a slap. Damn, is this what it's gonna be like the entire year?

They herded us onto another bus, but this one's a little different. It had wire over all the windows, like a prison bus. I yelled out to the driver, "Hey, driver, are we soldiers or prisoners? What's with the wire on the window?" He yells back: "Stupid, it's so when we go through a village, they can't throw grenades in the window!" That comment really struck me. I'm now in a real combat zone.

Looking out the bus, everybody was wearing black pajamas. “How do you tell 'em apart?” I yelled up to the driver again. “Hey, driver, all are dressed the same. How do you tell the good guys and the bad guys?” A little irritated he yells back: “It's easy - if they point a rifle at you, they're probably bad guys.”

That did not help my apprehension. I survived my one year tour of duty, came home in June, 1968, but Vietnam has never left me. I once overheard two Vietnam veterans talking. One asked the other, “When were you in Vietnam?” The other veteran said, after pausing for a moment, “Last night.”

I know how they felt. We made that long trip to Vietnam and the war. Our bodies came home, but our minds are still there on that long trip.

[00:14:14] **June Guralnick:** That's an extraordinary piece, Bill. Thank you! I think it's a story so many veterans - doesn't matter what war they served in - can relate to. It has absolute depth of emotion and honesty. I know that story was not easy for you to write.

[00:14:31] **Bill Dixon:** And that was just day one.

[00:14:33] **Tamara Kissane:** What is it like for you all to hear each other's stories? You didn't serve at the same time, and you have different experiences, but you're sharing stories with one another. And how does it feel to listen to those?

[00:14:47] **Mark Bartholomew:** It's odd because there's so much similarity. The geography changes, but the experience doesn't, you know, it's, it's liberating in some way to be able to say, hey, this is what I experienced and not have pushback or, you know, somebody pulling away saying, oh, okay, that's too much, you know, being able to share this with other veterans who get it and understand such a good feeling.

[00:15:12] **June Guralnick:** You know, Mark, this might be a really good time for you to read your short story called “21.”

[00:15:19] **Mark Bartholomew:** Okay. Twenty-one. Twenty-one people. Twenty-one people who had families, hopes, dreams, and joys gone in a matter of moments. A blackened two hundred yards wreking of burning diesel, plastic and flesh studded with the skeletal remains of a fuel tanker silently marked their passing. I stood overwhelmed, smeared with greasy soot from collecting bodies crumbled in my hands.

Everyone there worked with almost instinctual quietness. Even the desert heat seemed to pause out of reverence for the loss. Then a woman screamed, and broke the silence. Doctor, doctor, she screamed in Arabic as she ran at me, cradling a limp toddler. Thrusting the child into my arm, she began to tell me that when the trucks wrecked and exploded, her daughter was struck by one of the trucks.

The little girl's neck was snapped and her skull crushed. Her already cooling body rested limply against my chest. Her mother frantically pulled on me and begged me to help. The girl's father came walking up slowly and the look on his face told me that he had accepted what his wife had not - that their daughter was gone and he had to hold his grief at bay to help his wife.

When he got close enough to me, he gestured for me to pass the child to him. I complied. The mother shrieked and sobbed - words had escaped me to this point and all I could say with my trembling voices was "I'm sorry." He nodded and clasped my shoulder and put his hand around his wife. They turned and walked away. Twenty-one people gone that day - and all I could mutter was two words.

[00:16:55] **June Guralnick:** That's an incredible story. Mark, how did it feel to write that story?

[00:16:59] **Mark Bartholomew:** It's good to be able to share it, you know, because with my unit and my position, I'm the one they come to for help. So I couldn't really say, "hey, you know, I'm falling apart with this." But being able to let it out now and share it with other veterans and get that acceptance, it's pretty liberating.

I'll always carry that experience with me, but I don't have the same guilt I did as when I first came back.

[00:17:25] **Tamara Kissane:** You've touched on this a little bit, but I'm curious to hear some more about whether you think that this type of writing, expressive writing, could be helpful to other veterans and how.

[00:17:39] **Mark Bartholomew:** I think it's hugely helpful. It's hard because you can't share some of this stuff with your friends and family who haven't experienced it. But by normalizing this experience and sharing it with other veterans, it lets them share their experience. We have a huge suicide rate among veterans and part of that is isolation. And if we can get each other talking, maybe that'll knock down some of that rate.

[00:18:05] **Gail Ashby Bryant:** I think it could be very enlightening to other veterans because you don't get to share your experience, especially if it's something that happened in 1975. And so all of those experiences are buried deep inside you until you meet up with other veterans, and then you have the opportunity to express it, to tell other people how you felt.

At that time, and you know, I think like Mark was saying, your perspective changes now. You look back at everything fifty years later and you go, wow, there was really more to it than that. And then you get to talk to other veterans about it and they understand where you are coming from, what your feelings are, and I always say it's just a wonderful validation of who you were and who you are now.

[00:19:07] **Bill Dixon:** I think it would take a really special writer to be able to tell the story that Mark did to civilians. We as veterans may not have exactly the same experience. But there's a certain brotherhood and understanding between ourselves where the people who have never been in a situation, life or death, a situation like that, a veteran telling other veterans, the story is a totally different story than telling someone who's never been or experienced a war.

It's something you can't explain. It's just beyond most civilians' comprehension that we have the brotherhood or sisterhood - that we understand even if we didn't go through that exact same thing - but we understand.

[00:19:51] **June Guralnick:** And I think in a lot of the writing that you do, you've also broken down stereotypical views of, you know, what are the concerns and hopes and dreams of a veteran? You know, how has that experience shaped their life? Each of you breaks down that stereotype in so many interesting and provocative, wonderful ways.

[00:20:13] **Mark Bartholomew:** When you go back and write something like "21," it's emotionally tough to take that one moment out and kind of examine it. Because that day, I handled that mass casualty, then went back, took care of the unit, and then went on mission.

[00:20:28] **June Guralnick:** There's a vast emotional journey that's been traveled raveled, right?

[00:20:33] **Mark Bartholomew:** Yeah. And I think no matter how much, for lack of a better word, evil, you know, are problems in the world. Joy is never going to be suppressed. It always comes back. It may take a day off, but it's showing back up.

[00:20:47] **Tamara Kissane:** I have a question about something that Gail mentioned about reflecting through writing and gaining perspective, and I just wondered if either you, Gail, or Bill, would like to talk about that perspective that you've gained over time as you write about, you know, who you were all those years ago when you were serving.

[00:21:08] **Gail Ashby Bryant:** I think the perspective that I gained has allowed me to be the writer that I always wanted to be. And so I can write about anything. I can write, you know, something scary or something happy or sad, and there would be so many people out there who would be able to relate to what I wrote, that it wouldn't matter, you know, that I'm just a, you know, old grandma veteran.

[00:21:41] **Bill Dixon:** I go to a group. When I first joined the group, the man that was a facilitator at the time told me to write my story. And I wrote the story and he pointed out to me that I wrote the story that I gave him more from a reporter reporting on a story. It wasn't my story, it was a story. And that's one of the things that I got out of working with June and writing and so forth, is I'm now able to tell my story instead of a story. And it's made a big difference in my perspective.

[00:22:11] **June Guralnick:** I just want to come back to this thought. Because I believe that the arts, writing included, can powerfully affect and heal and lead to positive change in someone's life. I'd love to hear your thoughts on why you think other veterans should embrace the arts.

[00:22:34] **Gail Ashby Bryant:** I think it's important for other veterans to embrace the arts, because I think you had touched on it before, just a little bit about stereotypes. And I think that a lot of veterans are stereotyped. When you see a vet, you think of somebody with, you know, missing arms or missing legs, very bitter, always in pain, just on the verge of death.

No happiness, no joy. That the whole military experience has broken them down. But I have learned through the arts, just by doing, you know, working with you, June, that veterans have a talent that's within them. They're not necessarily the greatest writers or the greatest artists or the greatest musicians, but they have or we have something in us that we need to express. And to be able to express it in a beautiful way, I think changes people's perception of what a veteran is and what veterans' experiences are. They're not all bad.

[00:23:50] **June Guralnick:** I just want to take a moment and thank each and every one of you for participating today; for the amazing, wonderful, powerful,

beautiful writings that each of you do; for your bravery and honesty to tell your stories. Cause as we all know, that takes guts. I just want to say I have been so honored to be part of your writing journey and I look forward to hearing some more of your absolutely marvelous stories.

[00:24:23] **Bill Dixon:** Definitely want to thank you June and for the opportunity for all of us to come together cause it has really made a great deal of difference in our day-to-day lives and lives of our families and so forth.

[00:24:37] **Gail Ashby Bryant:** Just want to thank you for being my homie and my muse. You have injected just a whole lot more stories in me that are just waiting to burst out and had it not been for you, I don't think I would've ever found them.

[00:25:00] **Tamara Kissane:** 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: **Describe the day before leaving home to begin a new chapter in your life. Include a description of something you carried with you from home to your new surroundings that you cared deeply about.**

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; 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, who's 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 at artistsoapbox.org and juneguralnick.com.