Conversation with a Veteran
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Jason Deitch is a former US Army Medic who served more than a decade in Central and Latin America, the Middle East and Africa. He completed undergraduate and graduate work at UC Berkeley (BA Philosophy, MA Ethics and Social Theory, PhD Sociology), where his research focused on how combat veterans rebuild social identity and recommit to social institutions post-service. He was also the founder of the student veterans’ group, Cal Veterans, at UC Berkeley. For the past decade he has consulted and mentored for many veteran service organizations, primarily in California.

Do you think that libraries are good places for veteran resource centers?

The skill sets, resources and dedication I have seen have convinced me that you people can play a crucial role in positively changing the way that veterans return to their communities -- without having to undergo the isolation, fear, pain and shame that so many veterans have experienced. Libraries still have a viable character in our culture of being safe places where people care and want to help, and where core professional values of respect and confidentiality are upheld. In my experience of the last two years, librarians have not only never said no, they have gone far out of their way to ensure that veterans have had access to as many resources as possible. So before we begin, let me say thank you all very much.

What’s the first step if a library wants to prepare to understand and serve veterans?

Find your County Veteran Services Officer at CalVet (800-952-5626), or www.nacvso.org, on the “Find a Service Officer” page. Every county in California has this officer, whose job it is to help their constituent veterans successfully get access to every benefit they are entitled to, and to advocate
for those veterans. These people are the front line staff of the statewide California Department of Veteran Affairs and are highly trained in the dense and esoteric field of veteran benefits. Although they can’t train you to do exactly what they do, they can give some well-designed introductory trainings for staff and volunteers on sources and tools for serving veterans and helping them get their benefits. The CVSO is also a good longterm relationship to build, since they can respond to a very wide range of situations from basic informational needs to serious crisis interventions in homelessness and mental health.

Is there anyone else you feel it’s crucial to get information from at the start?

Yes, your local Vet Center. If the CVSO is the benefits advocacy big gun, then The Vet Center is its parallel in community access and readjustment issues. They are part of the federal Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), but their ethic and methods are quite different and, frankly, far superior. Their mission statement says a lot: “We are the people in VA who welcome home war veterans with honor by providing quality readjustment counseling in a caring manner. Vet Centers understand and appreciate Veterans’ war experiences while assisting them and their family members toward a successful post-war adjustment in or near their community.”

Vet Centers have a Team Leader, one or two Outreach Officers, and a number of Readjustment Counselors with expertise in different areas such as family therapy, PTSD and military sexual trauma. Vet Centers usually have a number of group therapy and social activities going on during the week and on weekends. This could cover from a Monday night Combat Vets Group Therapy session to a Sunday softball league. The real cornerstone of all the Vet Center does is provide veterans with very high quality individual therapy. So they are really a re-integration social service community center for combat veterans.

The Vet Center can help you design your library’s resource or outreach center, by a) telling you exactly what they do and do not provide at their specific center, and b) giving you background on the current situation and status of combat veterans in your community. Present your library as a new partner in a longterm, ongoing effort to serve the veterans in your community.
You were the veteran advisor to a Contra Costa County effort to serve veterans, and you strongly suggest that every library have such a veteran advisor.

Yes, a veteran advisor will be what combat units call “a force multiplier” – something that increases your impact by orders of magnitude. A veteran advisor is your secret weapon, a crucial component to help you and your staff understand veterans and to give your efforts credibility among the veterans you’re trying to reach. Let’s hear from Chris Brown, who was the library manager who involved me in Contra Costa’s program:

“The right veteran advisor can be an extremely active and responsive partner who contributes high-profile resources to your project. When my library developed a number of welcome home events for veterans we secured an amenity rich city auditorium, Whole Foods catered lunches, Starbucks coffee and UFC Gym memberships for veteran attendees. Jason, our veteran advisor, secured FBI, Google and County Sheriff job recruiters in addition to the Director of Veteran Services from the University of California, Berkeley who could advise veteran students on the transfer process. This type of performance proved to be Jason’s norm, and high-profile outputs were delivered over the course of an entire year. He displayed an incredible work ethic that always made me feel I had made the right decision to not only serve the information needs of veterans, but to build a partnership. Your veteran advisor will help you to see the value of your library for veterans, and alert you to future opportunity. You simply need to communicate the value you can bring to their community.

“The right veteran advisor will help you see the value of your library service with new eyes. When I started library service for veterans I never considered the value of library spaces as calm locations in the community, which can be important for veterans who suffer from PTSD, as I was completely focused on their veteran information needs. On a tour of a library space for an event Jason remarked that the space was an incredibly calm environment due to the library’s sculptural waterfall, white noise and the extensive community garden, and how valuable that library space could be for both our welcome home events and future veteran community events. Additionally, he remarked on the library’s close proximity to public transit, which would be critical for veterans
who took a shuttle from the local VA clinic or veteran groups from the local college. Many of your library spaces feature these valuable amenities.

“A sign of the right veteran advisor will be that they are leaders for other veteran events in your community. An advisor well connected to the rest of the veteran community will provide you a foundation for continuous opportunity to serve veterans in your community. During our project Jason happened to serve as an Assistant Director of Programs for a local Stand Down, a multi-day event to connect homeless and in-need veterans with medical, dental, legal and DMV help. Due to our strong relationship Jason secured the library a service table for two days at the event, where we assembled a team of library staff from 5 city and county library systems who created over 350 library cards for homeless veterans. Locate the right veteran advisor to set the foundation for unforeseen opportunity.

“How did I locate my veteran advisor? I led with my resources. Let the veteran community know right from the start what you have to offer in a practical way. If your library has access to valuable event spaces, a budget for speakers or programs, let the veterans in your community know you’re serious about creating value for veterans, and you’re going to couple your intention with valuable pragmatic resources. Finally, patience will be essential to your search for the most effective veteran advisor. I met with the director of the local vet center, a veteran counselor, a veteran mentor group and a veterans collaborative group before I found Jason, and each of these initial efforts brought about feedback, references and ideas, which eventually lead me to the right fit. “

**Does it matter what generation your veteran advisor comes from?**

It’s certainly not a hard-and-fast rule, but I suggest that you look for current generation veterans, or as we are often referred to as OIF/OEF vets: Operation Iraq Freedom, Operation Enduring Freedom (Afghanistan). First, many of us are in college and so you can find us through the veteran student group and veteran resource office of your local community college or four-year institution. Student veterans are already attuned to libraries, and colleges are also a rich source of people who are looking for project oriented, contributory and community-oriented service, or possibly work they can relate to a course project. Second, I feel that younger veterans are the most energized, willing
and available pool of veterans to poach from, and we tend to be current with technology and culture. And of course we’re the most amazing and attractive. “-))

So ask the veteran student group, ask your CVSO and Vet Center, ask everyone you know if they have a friend or relative who served and who might like to be a “cultural ambassador” for an important library initiative, who can help you and your staff learn about the military, reach out to all sorts of veterans, and give credibility to your efforts. Ideally you’ll end up with a small team of veteran advisors, and, I want to be absolutely clear here, these women and men will be the difference between having some run-of-the-mill veterans services at your library and having your programs change lives. Don’t underestimate how valuable your veteran advisor teammates can be, and how interesting it might be to work with us. And remember, veterans are suckers for a good cause, so if we get the vibe that you’re really trying to make a difference, that this won’t be a two-week “while it catches my fancy” project and that you are truly really making the effort to be good at your job, you are really going to learn the meaning of disproportionate loyalty and commitment. (And finally and crucially, if there is a beer and some free stuff involved -- a d-ring and a key chain compass are like siren songs to us!)

**How should a library go about designing their particular resource center? Or can all of them be the same?**

I think every library should do some reconnaissance of what is already being done well by other government agencies or veteran-serving organizations. (You’ll see references to “VSO’s” but they aren’t the same as your County VSO or CVSO – I know it’s confusing!) There are thousands of VSO’s out there, many of them small and well-intentioned, and a lot of them really didn’t do any needs assessment before beginning. Your veteran advisor (and other veterans interested in helping you) can inform you about what’s already in place in your community and what the gaps are, and they can interview other veterans about what the specific needs are in your community. This is also some preliminary marketing for your services: the word will go out that you are preparing to provide some good resources, and you were smart and in touch enough to get veterans to help you do that. It’s a good idea to have your veteran advisor and other veterans do the interviews to determine what veterans want and need in their community. They probably have the ability to
communicate meaningfully and successfully with veterans, due to their shared vocabulary, experience and sense of humor (and, just so you know, veteran humor can be described as blood-curdling, egregious, vile and totally appropriate to their culture and experience -- you have been officially warned). This basic trust is crucial to your efforts and is hard for you to generate from scratch if you are not a veteran yourself.

I think that your guiding principles when designing program for veterans should be a) relevance and b) concrete quality of life improvement. Does the program I am designing meet the current central needs of veterans? Have I designed this program to actually help, not just appear to, even in a small way? For example, if one of your goals is to make it easier for veterans to locate and get to VA health facilities, you provide clear pre-printed maps with routes for car, public transportation and walking. You know from your CVSO that the VA provides free shuttle services to and from certain locations and you have a handout for that as well. These small steps could actually make the difference between a veteran going to those facilities and receiving aid -- or not.

I think some librarians who’ve never served, or who don’t have military in the family, may be hesitant to talk to veterans or to ask them questions.

Well, it’s true that veterans have a long history of hearing very inappropriate questions from civilians, and so veterans may be hesitant, untrusting, or downright suspicious at first. I think that if you are direct, sincere and genuine, you can’t go wrong with a veteran. You don’t have to avoid the elephant in the room; you can say, “I’m human, I’ll make mistakes, but I’m always going to treat you with the respect you deserve, I want to develop programs that really help, and I want your help and guidance.”

On their part, veterans are very resistant to asking for help, so it may take persistence on your part before they can open up to you about what they need. If you are willing to listen patiently and respectfully, you will eventually learn what you want to know.

Do you think it’s necessary to understand military culture in order to help veterans?
It helps. The more surrounded you are with the language, lifestyle and flavors of the culture, the better you will be at comfortably moving in it. Think about it: you want cultural competency about any of the groups that your library serves, why not veterans?

**Can you talk a little about this idea of cultural competency as a foundation for outreach?**

There are so many great memoirs about military service that can help you understand what military training is like. In Sociology, institutions like the military are defined as “totalizing institutions.” That means that they regulate and control, to a far, far greater degree than in standard communities, all the aspects of daily life, behavior, thought and action. Another critical aspect of the military is that the content of its society is aim-specific: the fighting of war. In one way or another, every single person is a part of the fighting machine, and this foundational fact requires a much, much different culture then the standard American one. This means the military has had to design a way to completely liquify pre-existing culture, and replace it with their own. And luckily for them, they usually get a recruit when he or she is seventeen or eighteen years old – incredibly impressionable and totally concerned with what other people think of them.

Long story short, in basic training in any service, individuality and difference are stripped away; hierarchical authority is completely inculcated; uniformity of appearance, speech, behavior and thinking become a necessity for survival. Completely reliable Interdependence becomes a central pillar of thought and action; the person next to you might save your life, and we are all responsible for each other. And you are given your purpose.

This is just the start of everyone’s military experience. There is anywhere between four and thirty years ahead, of military experience and of reinforcement of culture. And if a soldier is deployed to combat, he or she is exposed to intense, near-limitless violence, death and destruction, and forced to rationalize conduct and daily existence by way of disassociation and callousness. Now imagine coming home. Imagine being under rocket attack in a Forward Operating Base in the highlands of Afghanistan on a Wednesday morning, and having to go to Safeway to buy food and toilet paper on Friday night. This is coming home. No matter who is waiting for you when you exit
the airplane, it is a rapid, jarring, intensely disorienting experience, that can simultaneously be joyful -- which ironically can add to the disorientation!

When members of the military approach their discharge date, they’re required to participate in a program of about five days, dealing with very elementary issues of civilian life, and then they are out, gone and alone. One day a soldier, the next day in a culture of utterly different norms. One veteran, who actually started community college a week after discharge, told me that he suddenly froze, and was paralyzed by fear and the realization that there was not a single person in his classroom who believed in anything he did or cared about anything he cared about. Newly discharged veterans wonder: How do you have conversations? What is appropriate speech and physical contact? How are friendships made and maintained? What makes a person good and trustworthy? Everything that was, a week ago, unshakeable truth vanishes and nothing is put back in its place.

Anything else you want us to know?

Veterans today represent the single largest population of skilled, dedicated, civically minded leadership this country has. We are intelligent and, if we can stay in school, we outperform educationally. We realize that Americans hold contradictory beliefs about us, that we are riddled with PTSD, suicide, depression, that we are ticking time bombs, and at the same time many people know that we crave purpose, want to serve, and have tremendous leadership potential. Find out for yourselves who we are! We are all willing to help you do so.

Conversation condensed and edited by Mary Menzel, director of the California Center for the Book.