

Musician Darden Smith Is Saving Soldiers Lives Through Songwriting



[Wendy Grossman Kantor](#)

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Former Army Sgt. Joshua Geartz wants to do something about the startling number of veterans who attempt to take their own lives each year — because he was once one of them.

After suffering for years from a serious brain injury and PTSD, Geartz, 37, attempted suicide in 2014. Fortunately, his wife came home and told him she was pregnant with their second son.

Geartz was injured in his last night in Abu Ghraib on September 18, 2003. He and his company commander were driving to the airport when a road side bomb went off three feet from Geartz.

The bomb caused traumatic brain injuries, spine injuries and blood clots, which limited the movement in his legs. Geartz once ran at least nine miles a day, but after his injury, he was

unable walk more than 10 feet at a time and suffered multiple seizures a day. Geartz, who uses a wheelchair, had a service dog to help with the seizures.

But there is something that has helped Geartz during his darkest times: his love of music. He always had his harmonica on him and took it everywhere he was deployed.



Joshua Geartz

Bryan Lasky

A couple months before his son was born, Geartz considered killing himself again in October 2015. But his wife found a program online called [Songwriting with Soldiers](#), and enrolled him in a weekend retreat near their home in North Tonawanda, New York.

“I said I’d give it one more shot before I tried it again,” Geartz says.

During the retreat, he was paired with singer-songwriter Mary Gauthier, and they struck up a conversation.

“We talked about friends lost in combat and the lives I had to take,” Geartz says.

He told Gauthier things he hadn’t told anyone.

“I’m sitting with this complete stranger, who has no military ties – this is not her world – she looked at me and said, ‘I’m glad you’re still here. You did what you had to do,’ ” Geartz recalls.



Joshua Geartz and Mary Gauthier

Jodi Martinez

“I just told this complete stranger the darkest, most horrible things that I’d ever done and she just said, ‘I’m glad you’re still here.’ It didn’t shock her. There was no judgment. It gave me a little bit of hope,” he says.

Together, Geartz and Gauthier wrote a song called, “Still on the Ride.” A month after the retreat, he performed it with her in Nashville on stage at the Grand Ole Opry.

“He got a standing ovation that went on and on and on and on,” Gauthier tells PEOPLE.

All the musicians on stage put their instruments down and applauded too.

“We all just stood for Josh. We stood for his service and his sacrifice and for his story that we sang in the song we wrote together.”



Joshua Geartz backstage at the Opry

Courtesy Josh Geartz

Songwriting with Soldiers was founded five years ago by Austin-based songwriter Darden Smith. A few years before, Smith performed at Landstuhl Regional Medical Center near Ramstein Air Base in Germany. He didn't think he'd have anything in common with anyone in his audience — but back stage, he struck up a conversation with a Marine.



Darden Smith

Songwriting With Soldiers

“Turns out I knew his brother-in-law and I knew the guy who was best man in his wedding,” Smith says. “I’d never spoken to a man in uniform before. I stood around talking to him for two and half hours.

“I am a songwriter. So I said, ‘I’d love to write a song with this guy,’ ” Smith says.

And he did.

Smith’s song, “Angel Flight” – co-written with friend Radney Foster — was commissioned by the Texas National Guard.

Songwriting with Soldiers held seven retreats this year in Virginia, Colorado, Texas, Arizona and New York – and one day workshops in Virginia.

“We’re expanding. We’re growing,” says Smith.

Some of the retreats are just individual soldiers, sometimes it’s couples and sometimes it’s soldiers’ families.

“Most of the songwriters we’re bringing in — all of them but me — have number 1 songs and are Grammy winners who have sold a bunch of records,” Smith says. “It’s not about building our careers. It’s bringing ourselves to the service of these men and women.”

Mobile recording studios are brought to the retreats and the soldiers songs are recorded and can be [bought online](#).

“I applaud their effort,” says veteran advocate, Sudip Bose, founder of [The Battle Continues](#). “When you’re a rough-and-tough drill sergeant, you’re taught to be a tough guy — and when you come back, you’re not always encouraged to talk about these things that are haunting you. Songwriting is a good way to communicate.”



Group at a retreat

Andy Dunaway

Two years after going through the program, Geartz has lost more than 180 pounds, stopped drinking, stopped having seizures and stopped having suicidal thoughts. And he has performed his song on stage a few more times with Gauthier.

“I had people tell me, ‘My father killed himself... I didn’t understand anything, he never would talk to me,’” Geartz says. “And I heard your song and it was like 50 years of questions were answered in three minutes.’ ”

Now, his goal is to have more soldiers go through the program that changed his life, made him feel less alone and gave him purpose. This summer, he spent a little over a month riding his wheelchair 422 miles from Angola, Indiana to Buffalo to raise awareness for the 22 veterans a day who commit suicide. He raised \$33,000 and donated \$22,000 to the songwriting program.

“I don’t like handouts,” Geartz says. (The rest of the money he raised went to the nonprofit that gave him a power wheelchair.)

He spends most of his time with his almost 2-year-old son, Silas. “He is 100 percent daddy’s boy. I kinda see him as a guardian angel,” Geartz says. “He instantly understands me.”

On January 26, Gauthier is releasing an album called *Rifles and Rosary Beads* — a selection of songs she co-wrote with veterans.

“It’s important that we stop and listen to what our veterans are telling us about what they’re going through when they come home,” Gauthier says. “If we listen to what they have to say – what they have to say really, really matters.

“With this program, Darden has really created some good in the world and I’m just honored to be a part of it,” Gauthier adds.

<http://people.com/human-interest/musician-darden-smith-is-saving-soldiers-lives-through-songwriting/>