

Press Information

Synopsis

The Welcome offers a fiercely intimate view of life after war: the fear, anger and isolation of post-traumatic stress that affects vets and family members alike. As we join these vets in a small room for an unusual five day healing retreat, we witness how the ruins of war can be transformed into the beauty of poetry. Here our perceptions are changed, our psyches strained, and our hearts broken. And at the end, when this poetry is shared with a large civilian audience, we begin to understand that all of us are a vital piece of the Welcome as Veterans try to find the way back home. Their examples of unflinching honesty, courage and love lift us up, inspiring all of us once again to feel our common humanity, always the first casualty of war.

TRT - 93:33

Principle Crew and Credits:

See the crew page: www.thewelcomethemovie.com/crew/

Veterans:

See the Vets page: www.thewelcomethemovie.com/vets/

Director's Statement:

"I am so lucky to have been in the right place at the right time. Making The Welcome has been one of the most rewarding and moving experiences of my life. The soldiers and their family members in this film are extraordinarily courageous people. They signed up for the healing retreat not knowing what it would involve, who else would be there, or how they would be received by the community on the final day. All while being filmed. Their sobering honesty, vulnerability, and astounding creativity gives us an unflinching view into the aftermath of war. By sharing this burden with us, something profound happens, and we are moved to a deeper understanding of the effects of war on every one of us. I believe this is a rare film, transcending both political divisions and the cultural distance between veterans and civilians. In them I believe we see ourselves, our neighbors and each other. This is the gift they bring home to all of us - our common humanity."

Kim Shelton's film bio:

Kim has been making films for over 25 years. Her tastes are "eclectic", to say the least, and the films cover a wide and unusual variety of topics. The films are: The Highly Exalted (1984 - Buckaroos in N. Nevada), Cowboy Poets (1989 - as the title suggests), Tuscarora (Co-Producer - 1992 - a famous ceramic artist in a tiny town in N. Nevada), Lost Borders, Coming of Age in the Wilderness (1998 - teenagers participating in an ancient wilderness rite of passage), A Great Wonder (2004 - Three of the so-called Lost Youth of Sudan resettling in America) and now The Welcome (2011 - on Returning Veterans, their families and the vital role played by the civilian community in The Welcome needed to come home again).

She studies the poignancy of personal lives and stories, with an eye toward bringing light to the darkness and helping audiences to be in touch with some of our most basic cultural archetypes - cowboys, youth, creativity and war. Her films have won numerous awards and have been broadcast worldwide on PBS, POV and National Geographic and on stations in Canada, Germany, France, Australia, England and S. Africa. Some of these films can be purchased at:

The Highly Exalted (1984)
Lost Borders, Coming of Age in the Wilderness (1998)
A Great Wonder (2004)

Kim Shelton, Producer/Director
Two Shoes Productions
Ashland, Or 97520
541-821-2036 shelton@ccountry.net

Kim Shelton is married to Bill McMillan (co-producer of The Welcome), and is the mother of two grown sons.

Festivals and Awards:

Ashland Independent Film Festival, Audience Award, Best Feature Documentary

Woodstock Independent Film Festival, Woodstock, NY September, 2011

Docufest Atlanta, Atlanta, GA, September, 2011

Mill Valley film Festival, Mill Valley, CA, October, 2011

Heartland Film Festival, Indianapolis, IN, October, 2011

Gig Harbor Film Festival, Gig Harbor, WA, October, 2011

Ojai Film Festival, Ojai, CA, October, 2011

Bioneers East, Connecting for Change Conference, October, 2011

November Festivals have not yet been cleared for publication.

Facts about Veterans in the US:

Veterans in the US: 23,000,000
Vietnam Era Veterans: 7,500,000
Deployed to Afghanistan or Iraq: 2,052,405

Deployed twice or more to War Zones: 831,169 (40.5%)

Deaths (March, 2011)
Iraq - 4,429 Afghanistan - 1479 Total: 5,908

Wounded in Iraq and Afghanistan: 42,390

Total US Casualties (including injuries in both wars): 90,955

Post Traumatic Stress and/or Traumatic Brain Injuries:
Estimate (low) - 33%

Total number of VA patients from these two wars:
Total: 508,000
(9,000 new patients per month)

Deaths in Vietnam Total: - 58,209

Homeless - up to 30% are Veterans on any given night.
(statistics taken from Veterans for Common Sense, IAVA, DOD)

Film Maker's Notes - how this event came about:

Many people have asked how we, a middle aged couple with no particular family connection (though Kim's father was in the Navy at the very end of W.W.II), got so involved with the issue of Returning Veterans. Probably like most choices that change lives, this one wasn't really planned.

We watched the rapid escalation toward war in Afghanistan after 9/11, and like most, I'm sure, there was both a reluctant acceptance of this war and a lot of doubt about what might come of it. Iraq seemed like lunacy to both of us, and especially by the beginning of 2007, when things had really gone south, we became more frustrated with our distance from the whole thing and what was happening to the men and women who were coming home.

So, we thought we could at least do something, and decided to offer our skills in meditation and stress reduction to local Vets. Noble enough, but how to do that was not so obvious. The local VA hospital clearly didn't trust civilians, even though we were both therapists with plenty of experience. We went a different route and approached the local Vet Center. Wayne Price, then director, was kind, clearly skeptical, and gave us a one time shot with him, another therapist and three vets who agreed to check out what we had to offer. It did not go well. No connection, poorly explained, lousy execution, etc. Do-Gooders on the loose. Wayne was nice and took us to lunch anyway. I'm sure he thought that would be the last he would see of us.

Instead, we decided to think bigger. After visiting a "public" event as part of a program down in the SF BAY Area where the public, much to our surprise, did not appear, we decided that we would aim for that - create a program that would be focused on involving our local community and bringing them together with Vets. And since we were working from a place of general naiveté we figured, why not make a documentary of it at the same time? The Welcome Home Project was born.

We had both worked with Michael Meade, a well known mythologist and story teller who specialized in working with traumatized communities and we contacted him to see if he would be interested in bringing his magic to bear on Veterans. He was all for it and provided both the expertise and philosophical understanding that would focus the program. We had the right guy to lead it and, further, he would offer his services for free as cosponsor of the event.

We were on a roll, so we decided to go for it and ask the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, a world renowned Shakespeare company and Ashland's biggest business, to donate their grandest theater to the effort. This would be the 650 seat Bowmer Theatre, all the technical people and a volunteer staff. For free. A bit outlandish, but it seemed like the logical next step.

Fortuitously, OSF was premiering a play called "Welcome Home Jenny Sutter", about a female Iraq vet struggling with her return to home and family. It was a beautiful and painful play, and it fit like a glove with the subject of the Project. I'm sure that is why they went with our request, and Bill Rausch, the Director of the Festival, was curious enough to help make it happen.

So now we had an idea, a place and a date, but we were still just getting started. We needed several other things to come together to make this possible. Food and lodging for the Vets along with a place where deep emotional work could take place in privacy. A staff, men and women who had a history and credibility with Veterans, PTSD, Sexual Trauma, etc. to support Meade and the Veterans. Food, transportation, materials, etc. And most important, obviously, Veterans, family members and an enthusiastic civilian community.

It turned out that the easiest part of the whole thing was getting the community involved. Kim's sister and her family run a retreat center near town. Half price. We talked to a couple of friends who were pretty influential locally, they suggested others to talk to, and soon we had people calling our office to offer their help. This took a lot of forms, from a group of artists organized by our friend and gallery owner, Cathy DeForest, who put their creative minds to work, to restaurants, grocery stores, body workers, therapists, the local print shop, etc., all offering their services for free or at very reduced rates to help pull this novel event off. We were supported by Amy Blossom at the Library Association in S. Oregon, the Ashland School District and many other schools around S. Oregon. It didn't take long before we were speaking at Rotary Club meetings, church gatherings, the local VA hospital, etc. All of the money required for housing, food, transportation, publicity, etc., was raised locally through grants and individual donations. We were interviewed on radio and television and several newspaper articles were written, all before the actual event even happened. All of this helped to convince three other therapists (Mike Maxwell, Carl Robinson and Lauren McLagen), each legendary in Oregon veteran treatment circles, to also sign on as staff, pro bono. Together they combined for about 75 years of treatment for veterans.

It may say something about the particular community of S. Oregon and our relationships there, but what we took from all this was the understanding that if you give civilian communities a way to focus their concern about Veterans they will jump at the chance. Contrary to the conventional wisdom that people don't care about the wars and the men and women who fight them, we have seen that civilians are hungry for a way to be involved. They just want a focus and a nudge. In the end we could not come close to using all of the help that was offered in time, skills and energy.

The only really hard part was finding the Veterans who would be willing to participate in a very unusual retreat - the VA doesn't believe in Mythology and Poetry as "evidence based" interventions - and this effort took many months. After all, why would Veterans, especially Vietnam Vets who learned early to mistrust civilian motives, believe that they were not being set up for disappointment or even ridicule? And the younger vets, many too young or too shaken to believe in an effort like this one, were understandably reluctant to sign up for this potentially very weird and very public event. After all, isolation and paranoid thinking are common and understandable early responses to the aftermath of war.

So we went on the road and made all of this effort extremely personal. We met with Vets from LA to Seattle in Vet Centers, coffee shops and personal homes. Without fail they were courteous, even curious, but always reluctant. They needed to know us personally and to get it that our motives were not political or frivolous or exploitive. We ended up meeting personally with scores of veterans, including all of the Veterans who chose to participate, either in groups or one on one where they could check us out. The Vet Centers in Portland and Grants Pass were the most supportive and many of the Veterans we met with came through those organizations.

We met with many veterans who either wanted no part of this event or who were so clearly struggling with the intensity of their war experience that the retreat would not have been safe for them at that time. In the end, twenty three men and women stepped forward to come to the retreat: seventeen combat vets (men and women) and six spouses, partners or parents. We looked for Vets from any wars, especially Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan, and emphasized the importance of women vets and family members as well.

On Memorial Day, 2008, these men and women left the isolation and safety of four days of intimate and intense privacy together, climbed on a bus (donated) and went into Ashland to be received by their civilian neighbors. In an astonishing three hour show the vets entered into kind of poetic conversation with the sold out audience. Focused around an ancient story told by Meade, the Veterans and family members told a powerful "story" of their own, bringing ovations, tears, laughter and an often stunned, almost reverent silence.

This event did not remove the symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress. But it taught us that true healing is in reconnection, understanding and acceptance on a community wide level. Without this, veterans and their families are too often destined to remain alone, fighting memories and fears of a war long (or not so long) passed. In Ed Tick's words, "Healing means sharing the burden". That is what happened in Ashland, OR at the Memorial Day performance.

We are incredibly honored that these men and women were willing to take a chance with us. Each of them are truly amazing people, and while some of them are featured in the film much more than others, it took all of them equally to make it happen. This kind of retreat had never been done before, where the retreat itself would be focused around ancient stories, rituals and the writing of personal poetry. And where the culminating event would be a ceremonial coming together of the Vets and family members with the public in a large public ceremony of listening and receiving. For that we also owe deep gratitude to the community of Southern Oregon. They taught us that if you give people an idea and a direction, we will do the right thing. It is our hope that this film will provide the idea to communities all over the country. The people will do the rest.