

## Research Week Proposal

**Title** – A Piece of My Heart: Examining Healing Facilitated by the Performing Arts

**Program of Study** – Forensic Speech

**Presentation Type** – Performing Arts

**Mentor(s) and Mentor Email** – Denise Thomas, School of Communication and Digital Content (adthomas@liberty.edu) & Dr. David Allison, School of Communication and Digital Content (dallison@liberty.edu)

**Student name(s) and email(s)** – Cathryn Thomas, cothomas@liberty.edu (submitter & director)

**Performers:** Rebekah Sharpe, Britta Hinten, Sarah Johnson, Evan Young, Lindsey Ball (all undergraduate students)

**Category** – Creative and Artistic

**Abstract:** This presentation demonstrates the ability of art to facilitate healing from trauma. Soldiers returning from Vietnam were traumatized by the lack of appreciation and acknowledgement of their sacrifices. While many soldiers experienced a harsh reception upon returning to America after the war, for women who served the reality upon returning to America was even worse. Resources were not made readily available to female soldiers and the women who served with the Red Cross and USO were not offered the few resources available to the military personnel. *A Piece of My Heart* by Shirely Lauro examines the experience of women who served in Vietnam and the unique reception they received when they returned home. The six women in this play represent the 11,000 women who served in Vietnam (Vietnam Women's Memorial Foundation, 2018). While Act 1 of *A Piece of My Heart* spends time investigating the experiences of the women in country during the war, Act 2 focuses on their experiences and

struggles when they returned to America. The fifteen-minute original cutting which will be seen in this presentation is primarily taken from Act 2. In preparation for their performance, the students performing in *A Piece of My Heart* spent time discussing themes surrounding the war. Additional time was spent discussing personal life experiences of the students and the feelings that those experiences brought up in them. As a group, the team discussed traumatic events such as the assassination of President Kennedy, the Challenger explosion, the Oklahoma City bombing, and September 11<sup>th</sup> and the impact those events had on each member of our country, whether directly involved or not. These coaching sessions aided in understanding the emotions behind traumatic events. However, it was a traumatic experience the group faced while performing at a forensics tournament which ultimately aided them in connecting to the emotions of the characters.

After a presentation of this material at the weekly Monument Terrace veterans rally in Lynchburg, many veterans reported that seeing the piece was the first time they felt enabled to talk about their experiences in Vietnam and gain healing. Despite the fact that many veterans' organizations provide open forums for discussion as well as resources for PTSD, it was ultimately an artistic presentation that began the work of healing in the local veterans' community.

Vietnam women's memorial foundation. (2018). Vietnam women's memorial. Retrieved from:  
<http://www.vietnamwomensmemorial.org/vwmf.php>

**Christian worldview integration:** Perhaps the most famous biblical account of the arts being used for healing is when David played the harp to soothe Saul's soul. 1 Samuel 16:23 says, "Whenever the spirit from God came on Saul, David would take up his lyre and play. Then relief

would come to Saul; he would feel better, and the evil spirit would leave him” (NIV). As a Christian, I believe strongly God has gifted each of us with unique lenses through which we see the world. We interpret each event we experience through these lenses which are partially informed by our past experiences. The women and men for whom we performed, the veterans, had each experienced something that none of us had. While we could not even begin to imagine their experiences, or how they would view this piece through the lenses of those experiences, we could acknowledge that their experiences had value. Throughout the directing process, time was spent discussing our own lived experiences and how those experiences informed our interpretations of the words on the page. We also spent time discussing the opportunity that we had to reach local veterans on a level that no one had before. Many of the veterans for whom we would perform would not be Christians and might be triggered by the story that we were going to present to them. It was our goal to not only tell their story, but figure out how could we tell it with the hope of Christ. It was important that we acknowledge where our audience had been, the trauma of their experiences, that their story had value and that we present this package to them wrapped in a ribbon of hope.