Paper Mache for 11-13-26 by David Read

“Thank you for your service” is something we say with sincere appreciation, especially around Veterans Day. This year, I have been thinking about what might come after those words. Perhaps an invitation: Would you like to work with clay? Make something with stained glass? Spend an afternoon creating alongside other veterans? That may sound like an unusual Veterans Day observance but stay with me. When I became Executive Director of Yuba Sutter Arts & Culture, we were planning for our first Veterans Arts Initiative, the Veterans Art Park in Marysville. Seven veterans worked with professional artists to create 5-by-10-foot murals reflecting their military experiences. We installed them in a semicircle with a reflection bench. Located where Grocery Outlet now stands, the murals were removed before construction and remain in storage.

Veterans Day traces its origins to the armistice that halted fighting between the Allied nations and Germany on November 11, 1918. President Woodrow Wilson marked the first Armistice Day a year later. In 1954, the holiday became Veterans Day, honoring American veterans of all wars. Here in Yuba-Sutter, military connections run deep through Beale Air Force Base, veterans’ organizations, friendships, and families. We want our appreciation to take practical, welcoming forms throughout the year.

Our ceramics classes in Marysville have introduced veterans and their families to hand-building techniques. Some also attended pottery wheel classes we sponsored at Verge in Sacramento. These activities offer opportunities to learn, experiment, and enjoy one another’s company through shared experiences. Our “Portraits of Veterans” project photographed more than 400 local veterans with help from professional photographers. Sessions took place at the Veterans Stand Down, Museum of Forgotten Warriors, and Burrows Center for the Arts Gallery. We displayed the portraits together at locations around town, giving our community hundreds of faces to connect with military service. A few years back we even conducted bronze face casting workshops for Veterans.

Now we are planning stained-glass classes for veterans and others. Participants will select colors, cut and fit glass, apply copper foil, and solder their pieces together. There is satisfaction in making separate pieces belong together. There is also something humbling about discovering that glass does not necessarily respect your artistic intentions. Program details will be announced soon.

The finished object matters. So does having somewhere to go and people who look forward to seeing you. Conversation happens naturally when hands are busy. Quiet concentration deserves room, too. Our friends and mentors at VETART, the Veterans Art Project in Vista, California, share that understanding as well through free ceramics and glass casting programs serving veterans and the broader military community. Nationally, the Veterans Creative Arts Festival celebrates veterans’ accomplishments in visual art, writing, music, dance, and drama. Another initiative, Combat Paper, transforms military uniforms into handmade paper for prints, books, and other artwork. For a column called Paper Mache, that connection is hard to resist.

Veterans bring different interests and ambitions to these experiences. Some may want to explore difficult memories. Others may simply want to make a bowl that stands upright. We should welcome every reason someone walks through the studio door.

As we look back on this Veterans Day, let us carry our gratitude forward. Attend ceremonies, offer thanks, and listen when someone wishes to share and then keep the invitation open throughout the year. A seat at a worktable can be a meaningful expression of appreciation. So can a class, an exhibition, or an audience willing to pay attention. These invitations give our words a life beyond the holiday and make room for friendships, discoveries, and accomplishments we cannot yet imagine. “Thank you for your service” is a good beginning. “We saved you a place” might be a wonderful next sentence.