

**Q&A** Susan J. Barron, artist

## Making Art, Raising Awareness

A portrait exhibit captures veterans' struggles with post-traumatic stress.

**A**ward-winning artist Susan J. Barron hopes to capture multiple sides of veterans in her portraits. One veteran displays his patriotic tattoos; another cradles his infant daughter. But their varied stories and images are connected through their battles against post-traumatic stress (PTS).

Barron set out to raise awareness of PTS and veteran suicide through her project, "Depicting the Invisible: A Portrait Series of Veterans Suffering from PTSD," on display at the Army and Navy Club in Washington, D.C., through April 15.

Barron traveled the country to meet veterans to understand their struggles. In 2018, she created the project, in which large-scale, mixed-media portraits of 15 veterans are inscribed with their personal stories.

"I think that all Americans owe our veterans a huge debt of gratitude," Barron told *Military Officer*. "As an artist, I thought this story was a story that needed to be told. I could support veterans that need to have a voice."

### Did anything surprise you as you worked on this project?

One of the things I found so inspirational and didn't expect was the incredible love of life that these veterans have — the appreciation, the gratitude. They walk with such gratitude and dignity in the face of trauma. One of the veterans said to me that when you almost die three times, you just start living life to the fullest. I just found inspiration in their grace and their gratitude.

### What message do you hope your art sends about veterans?

Many of these veterans feel forgotten and feel that nobody cares, and I think that it's really import-



ant to shine a light on this PTSD epidemic. I hope veterans can walk away feeling that their voices have been heard. I hope these portraits are able to inspire civilians to step up and make a difference. I think that, for many families of veterans living with PTSD, they have told me these portraits and stories helped them to have empathy and understanding for their family members in a way they didn't have before. As one of my veterans said, if we don't talk about these stories, we can't save these lives.

### What was the most challenging part of working on this project?

One of the most emotional parts of this project for me was right before our New York City opening. I heard from one of the veteran's mothers that he had succumbed [to suicide]. It's really devastating. I think it only highlights what a struggle PTSD is. This is why we're telling these stories, so we can make it better for them. We need to inspire people to do the research, get the funding, find new treatments, support these veterans the way they need. ||||

— By Amanda Dolasinski, staff writer



*'I think that all Americans owe our veterans a huge debt of gratitude.'*

**Artist Susan J. Barron** hopes her portraits will inspire civilians to make a difference for struggling veterans.

*The members-only Army and Navy Club will open this exhibit to members of the public Saturdays from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. through April 15. A coat and tie are required for men and comparable attire for women.*

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