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AUGUST 2014

VOICES FROM THE HOMEFRONT

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OF THOSE WHO WAIT

The SOUTHERN ISSUE

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Cape Fear Regional Theatre will tell the stories of military spouses on stage. But getting there is the real story.

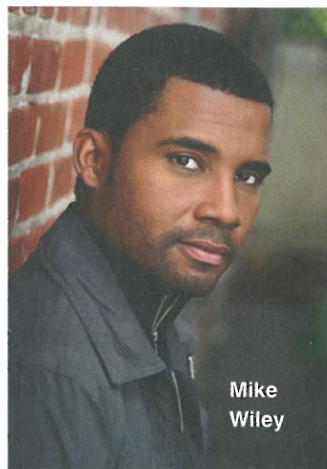


Photo by Leslie Florn

Military families, including Spc. Ashley Wright with her daughter, share stories of deployments past and present in a series of workshops this spring. Those stories will become part of "Voices from the Homefront" in the theater's 2015-16 season.

VOICES FROM THE HOMEFRONT

STORY BY **ALLISON WILLIAMS**



Mike Wiley

Playwright Mike Wiley thought bringing the stories of baseball pioneer Jackie Robinson and the 1961 Freedom Riders to the stage was tough.

The murder of Emmett Till, injustices of the civil rights era and the historic U.S. Supreme Court case "Brown vs. Board of Education" were daunting subjects, too. But when Cape Fear Regional Theatre hired him to write a play about military spouses, Wiley stepped into the unknown, which, when he thinks about it, isn't unlike the life of a wife (or husband) who accepts the often migratory and uncertain life of being married to a soldier.

Wiley will spend the better part of three years soaking up these stories and spinning them into a finished work. What that play will look, feel and sound like won't be known until the theater's 2015-16 season, but military families are invited to a town hall this month for conversation and a sneak peek as Wiley spends a week "workshopping" early drafts with a small group of actors. Sure to be there are the groups guiding Wiley: steering circles of Fort Bragg families which began meeting this spring, military liaison Julie Milani and the Orange County-based Hidden Voices, which specializes in telling the stories of groups of people on the margins.

Tom Quaintance has been trying to understand and reach more military families since he arrived at CFRT three years ago. He and his wife, Wallis, were new parents, and Wallis came home from mother-and-baby groups with incredible stories of military spouses. "Three dollars off on Military Appreciation Night is not enough," Tom Quaintance said. "I came in with the idea of a more meaningful connection to the military community."

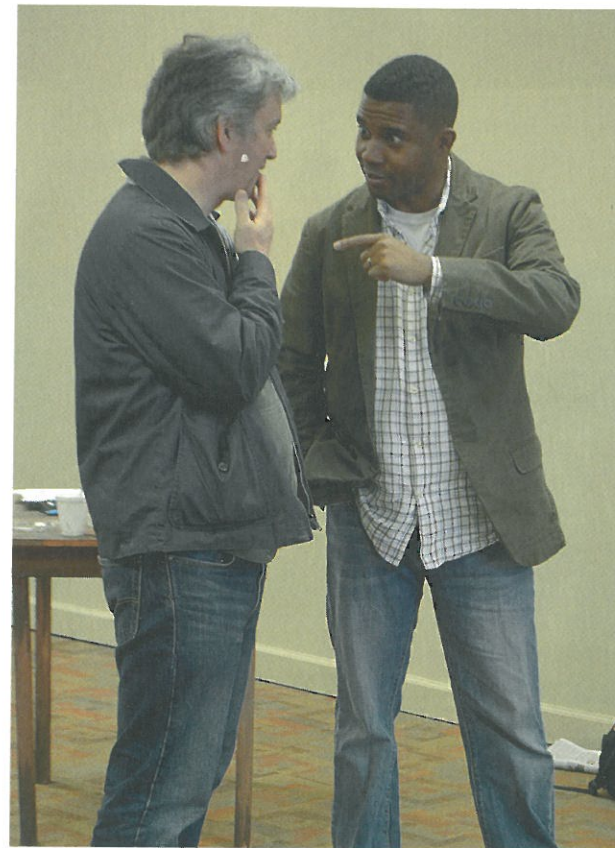
In January, the theater won a grant from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation to produce "Voices from the Homefront." Quaintance says 75 theaters applied for an Audience (R)Evolution program grant. Ten received one, including theaters in Dallas, Washington, Chicago and Los Angeles. CFRT hired Wiley and Hidden Voices, which called its first steering circle in March.

Lynden Harris founded Hidden Voices 12 years ago, working with prison inmates, victims of domestic violence, and immigrants. Hidden Voices has no salaried staff, not even Harris; she and Kathy Williams, the group's associate director, are paid a



Photos by Leslie Florn

Kathy Williams is associate director for Hidden Voices, which is working on two projects involving military families.



Above: Capt. Kyle Meisner, left, and Lt. Col. Kareem 'Monty' Montague are a 'dual military' couple.

Left: This is the second collaboration for Wiley and Tom Quaintance, the theater's artistic director, following last year's 'Parchman Hour' about the 1961 Freedom Riders.



Photos courtesy of Hidden Voices

A play, walking tour and video contest are part of 'We're Still Here and Moving,' a 2009 Hidden Voices project that examined the relationship between UNC-Chapel Hill and its African-American neighbors through more than 140 years of history.

per-project stipend. Their latest project, "None of the Above" spent three years exploring the "school to prison pipeline," the phenomenon in which draconian disciplinary policies force students out of the educational system and into the criminal justice system. "We're Still Here (and Moving)" examined how the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill thrived even as it often exploited its black neighbors. "La Vida Local" presented the view from Hispanic young adults who find themselves straddling two cultures in rural North Carolina. Franklin County teenagers — black, Latino, Asian — worked together to compile a book of recipes in "Not Yo Mama's Home Cooking."

Almost every project has three components: performance, interactive



Photos courtesy of Hidden Voices

Hispanic young adults straddling two cultures and two languages in the U.S. were the subject of 'La Vida Local,' a Hidden Voices project and play.

exhibits and digital media, but all of them begin with steering circles and hours and hours of interviews. Starting the conversation, Harris said, "That's what can make people a little nervous."

On a chilly morning this spring, conversation was slow to begin in a conference room at Cape Fear Regional Theatre. Gathered were a group of military spouses, Harris and Williams from Hidden Voices and Quaintance, who broke the ice.

"This project terrifies me," he said.

The group relaxed, and members were soon calling out words describing military spouses for artist Ashley Florence to scribble on



“The common bond is the sense of service, the sense of pride, the sense of commitment. I truly believe they are the backbone.”

poster paper. Florence led the group in an art project to create care packages, not to be mailed to a loved one but a diorama that would visually explain what it means to be a military spouse.

“They went from tentative to diving in,” Quaintance said. “It was great to hear the side conversations that went on during that process. They went from curious and reserved to really open and enthusiastic.”

It was the first of several workshops tailored to different groups of military spouses — spouses of active-duty and retired service members, dual military couples, male spouses and same-sex couples.

Wiley sat in on most of the sessions, listening and occasionally asking questions. He’s read letters written by military spouses and watched the short videos they’ve submitted. There are so many stories. The story of the wife who mopped up raw sewage seeping through the bathroom pipes just days into her husband’s deployment. Veteran wives counseling younger women not to wear the trench coat with nothing beneath to Green Ramp. Or the retired couple recounting their wedding in their native Puerto Rico in the 1970s, before email and cell phones. She planned the ceremony around his military leave but only had a letter with his flight number, a number that was repeated on different days.

“She goes to the airport three days in a row,” Wiley said, her hair and makeup done perfectly each time, their extended families in tow. On the fourth day, he arrived to greetings and warm wishes from an airport full of well-wishers.

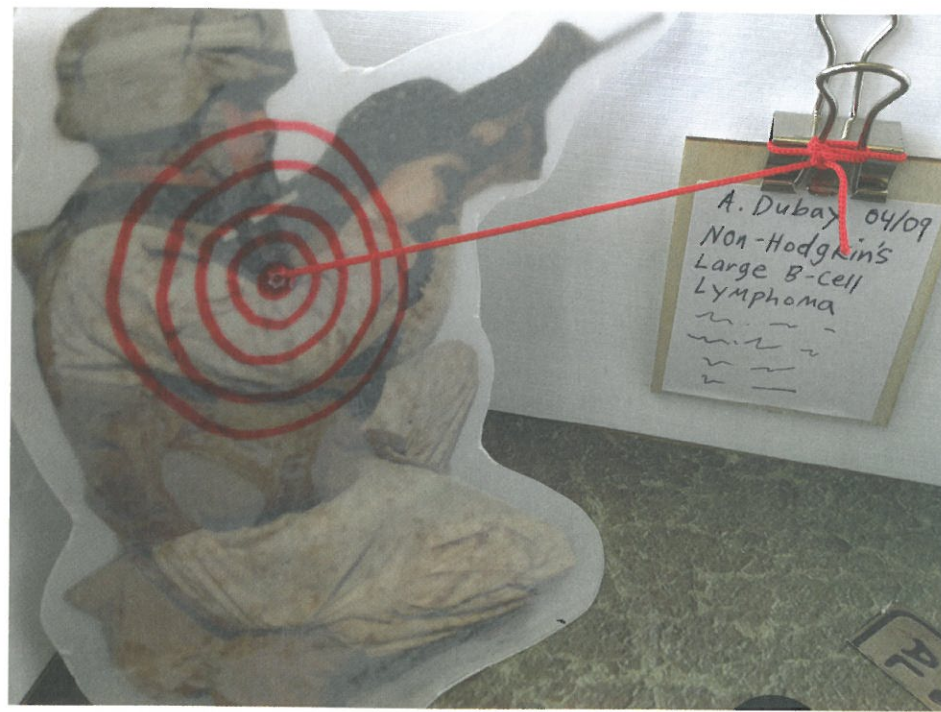
“Everyone has a different understanding of what the experience is,” Wiley says. “The common bond is the sense of service, the sense of pride, the sense of commitment. I truly believe they are the backbone.” ★



Above: Janet Shipp, left, and Betty Baker assemble care packages symbolizing their experiences as military spouses.

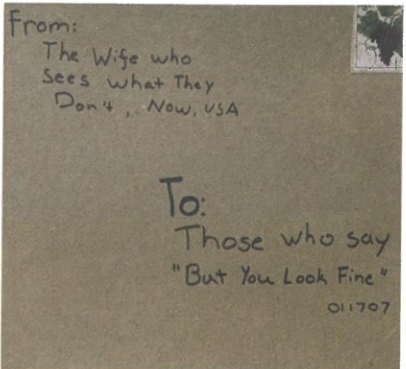
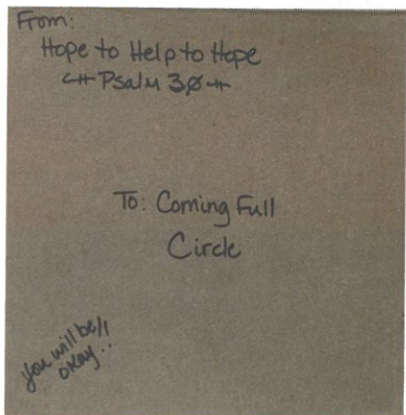
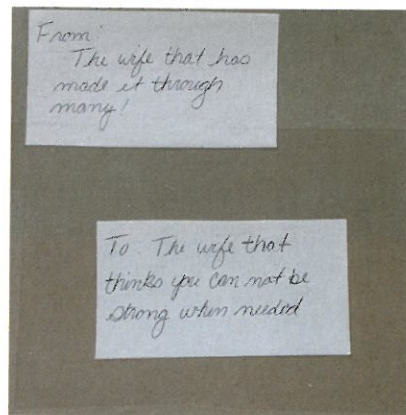
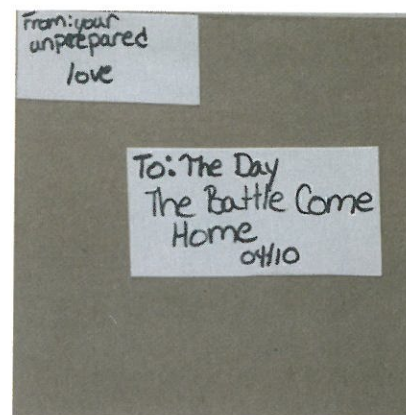
Left: Argie Rodriguez works on hers.

Photos by Leslie Flom



Photos by Ashley Florence

Care packages represent the stories of military spouses who created the dioramas at Cape Fear Regional Theatre.



IF YOU GO

“Voices from the Homefront” Town Hall

6 p.m. Aug. 14, Cape Fear Regional Theatre, 1209 Hay St., Fayetteville

Can’t go? CFRT seeks the stories of military spouses. Send yours in a letter to CFRT, P.O. Box 53723, Fayetteville, N.C. 28305 to the attention of Homefront, or to cfrt.homefront@gmail.com. You can call the Homefront phone line and leave a message telling your story at 910-849-1287. Schedule a session in the video booth by contacting Jae Powell at jpowell@cfrt.org.