

David Keefe, Montclair State University MFA, 2009

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David Keefe is a composite portrait of an artist, educator, storyteller, activist, administrator, husband, father – and a veteran of the war in Iraq, an identity that has colored the way he carries out the other roles in his life. Also defining him, he said, has been his graduate degree – a Master of Fine Arts in 2009 from Montclair State University, an institution that provided the tools for succeeding with his various vocations and avocations.

From the long list of his professional and volunteer accomplishments during the course of his lifetime, one never would guess that David is only in his late thirties. The resident of Upper Montclair, where he lives with his wife, also an artist, and four children, is perpetually in motion, a moving picture rather than a still life.

David probably is most renowned as the co-developer and primary implementer of Combat Paper NJ (CPNJ), a veterans' art initiative, which after five years has become a nationally recognized and celebrated program. CPNJ, currently the flagship program of Frontline Arts, which is under the fiscal sponsorship and 501(c)3 umbrella of the Printmaking Center of New Jersey, is a community-and-social-practice art project that brings veterans and those who never served in the military together to make paper and art out of military uniforms. The goal, said David, is to create works of art that “serve as a vehicle for veterans to share with the public the veteran experience, make witnesses of bystanders, and change the culture of the ‘silent veteran.’”

Combat Paper NJ inspired David to broaden his vision for community-focused art by creating in 2015 the pending-non-profit called Frontline Arts. Still in its infrastructure-building phase, Frontline Arts has a mission (like Combat Paper NJ) to ultimately build and connect communities.

For the past seven years, David also has been an adjunct professor of Art at Montclair State University where he has developed the “Combat Paper for Veterans” class. The course for veterans uses the CPNJ model of storytelling and community building – the only class of its kind in the country. Dave also has taught painting and various levels of art-related independent study at MSU. For next spring semester, David is taking the specific concept of art and community from the Combat Paper for Veterans Class to build a potential new class for participatory art focused on the general public, not just veterans.

In addition, he currently holds the position of Senior Assistant Dean for Veteran Initiatives at Columbia University's School of General Studies. At Columbia University, Dave is in the process of

developing a hub of veteran activity that will strengthen the veteran community, centralize existing resources, and develop new initiatives, such as the arts.

The one job from which he is retired, is a job that will have a lifelong effect upon him. He served as Sergeant from 2001-2009 in the United States Marine Corps. From 2006-2007, he completed a tour of combat duty in Iraq as a riverine infantry scout. David, who was born in Minnesota and raised in Delaware, was starting his junior year at the University of Delaware as a fine arts major, when the nation was attacked on September 11, 2001.

“I joined the Marine Reserves 11 days after 9/11. Something washed over me, and I became incapable of just sitting on the sidelines. My Uncle had served in Vietnam and my grandfather in WWII, and I had to act.” He finished his bachelor’s degree in 2003, and after a few years of serving in the Reserves and working in construction, he was then sent to Iraq in 2006 to conduct missions along the Euphrates River. As challenging as this tour of duty was, the “unexpected challenge” came upon his return from Iraq. “I was at loose ends, with no real direction, and questioning everything. Before I went to Iraq, I knew I wanted to get my MFA, so I managed to force myself to attend graduate school at Montclair. Enrolling in the program was the best thing I could have possibly done, as a strategy for facing the issues of a returning Marine, and artist,” he said. “As an artist, I had to tell my story.”

Upon graduating, Dave worked as an artist, taught art, and became an art-handler at Christie’s Auction House. “Those were rough years, not only because of the difficulties of being a working artist, but also because I was dealing with my experiences from Iraq and how they were affecting my life. Fortunately, because of my connections through the MFA program, and teaching as an adjunct, I was introduced to Combat Paper, and that is when I found myself, my community, and my art career.”

The MFA program was “tough, but gave me the guidance that ultimately led me to where I am today. I owe so much to all of my instructors, but particularly to Professor John Czerkowicz. He was the one who, at that time, advised me to intersect my art and my military experience. My graduate school years were very formative and a period of intense growth, thank to Professor Czerkowicz.” Also playing a significant role in his growth and development was Professor Julie Heffernan, a current MSU professor of Art and well-known artist based in Brooklyn.

Additionally, and to this day, Cathy Bebout, head of printmaking at MSU, and Andrew Atkinson, the director of the MFA program at MSU, have been very influential. “Cathy Bebout helped develop the Combat Paper for Veterans Class, and is instrumental in taking the class to the next level of Social Practice and Participatory Art. Professors Bebout and Atkinson have been fantastic mentors to my current art career.”

Nowadays, no matter what else he is doing, David regularly creates and exhibits his paintings, papermaking, prints, and art throughout the country. His passion, however, is taking his art to the streets of the community, not just to the galleries. He is compelled to create art that is aesthetically pleasing but tinged with social activism, and he thanks MSU for helping him frame that picture.