

# Soldiers Art Workshop brings military, civilians together

By Steve Escajeda / El Paso Inc.

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Krystyna Robbins helping a Fort Bliss soldier with a painting.

Photo by Gina Lochausen

Krystyna Robbins has had a long and distinguished career as an artist, winning numerous painting awards and competitions.

Her paintings are represented in many private, public and corporate collections worldwide and are exhibited in juried shows throughout the Southwest.

A little over a decade ago, she gave up her full-time painting career to focus on helping members of the military learn how to create art with a paint brush.

Krystyna and her husband, retired Lt. Col. John Robbins, founded the Soldiers Art Workshop on Fort Bliss in 2014.

The organization supports soldiers, spouses and their children through fine arts activities with the help of volunteer instruction from local artists that Robbins has recruited.

“It was during the Enduring Freedom war in Afghanistan, which was still going on in 2014, that my husband and I were talking about how some of those soldiers were coming back home with health and mental issues,” said Robbins, who was born in Scotland and migrated to New York, where she worked as a fashion designer in Manhattan’s renowned garment district. “We thought about starting some kind of art classes for them as a form of therapy.”

Her husband helped run the program for years, fundraising, getting artists and materials. It quickly grew to where they had three workshops a week.

The Soldier’s Art Workshop has expanded to after-school programs and evening and weekend classes at locations across Fort Bliss.

Raised in London, Robbins was one of the last Ellis Island immigrants to enter the United States in 1954.

She earned a degree from the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York and married her husband John, a West Point graduate. They had three children and moved to different bases throughout his Army career.

Raising three children, the first with Down syndrome, and moving from base to base made it difficult to continue her career as a fashion designer.

The constant transition began another creative outlet.

“I took some painting classes when we were stationed in Monterey, Calif.,” Robbins said. “It helped me so much when I was going through those stressful times. I can relate somewhat to how painting can help our injured soldiers and their families.”

Robbins has first-hand proof that the painting workshops are helping soldiers cope.

“We had one female captain who was painting with us while she was also going to therapy,” said Robbins. “She finally told me she got a lot more from our painting workshops than those therapy sessions, so she kept painting and dropped the therapy.”

Artist Gina Lochausen, the board vice president of the Soldiers Art Workshop, has been involved with assisting critically ill children for years.

“Any form of art, especially painting, is intrinsically therapeutic and that’s what Krystyna and John figured when they saw soldiers with life-altering injuries,” Lochausen said. “I’ve seen Krystyna sit and paint at the bedside with some of the soldiers and before they knew it, five hours had gone by, and they didn’t even know it.”

In 2013, Lochausen developed the Therapeutic Arts Program at El Paso Children’s Hospital, where she was involved until 2024.

“Our arts program provides kids, who are either battling cancer or some chronic illness, with painting supplies and instruction of painting techniques,” she said. “Our goal has been to help children pass the time with something that wasn’t much fun and make it as fun as we could for them.”

The Soldiers Art Workshops is as much about two communities as it is about the therapy.

“Fort Bliss is sometimes kind of a bubble and people may not often leave it,” said Lochausen. “We try to organize off-site activities that bring non-military and military people together.”

One collaborative effort is the Legacy Through Layers exhibition opening March 28 at the International Museum of Art on 1211 Montana.

The exhibit, which will run through April 18, is aimed at bringing together service members, spouses, civilian employees and professional artists to capture the stories of military life by creating 12 original murals that reflect the identity, history and spirit of the participating units.

“Local professional artists, some from the Soldiers Art Workshop, are paired with members of a Fort Bliss unit,” said Robin Fox, supervisor of skills development on Fort Bliss and the developer of the Legacy Through Layers exhibition. “The unit comes up with ideas of the history they’d like depicted on the murals, which will be permanently displayed at selected locations at Fort Bliss.”

Also opening on March 28 is Robbins’ one-woman show, "My Journey Through Art."

“I’m always excited about having the opportunity to share my paintings with the community,” said Robbins. “This time around, I’m especially excited about our two shows happening at the same time.”

Both exhibits are free.

“I’ve been doing this for a long time,” she said “I’m in my 80s now and it’s not that easy anymore, but I’ll continue painting and remain involved with the Soldiers Art Workshops for as long as I can. El Paso isn’t just a border town; it’s a military town.”

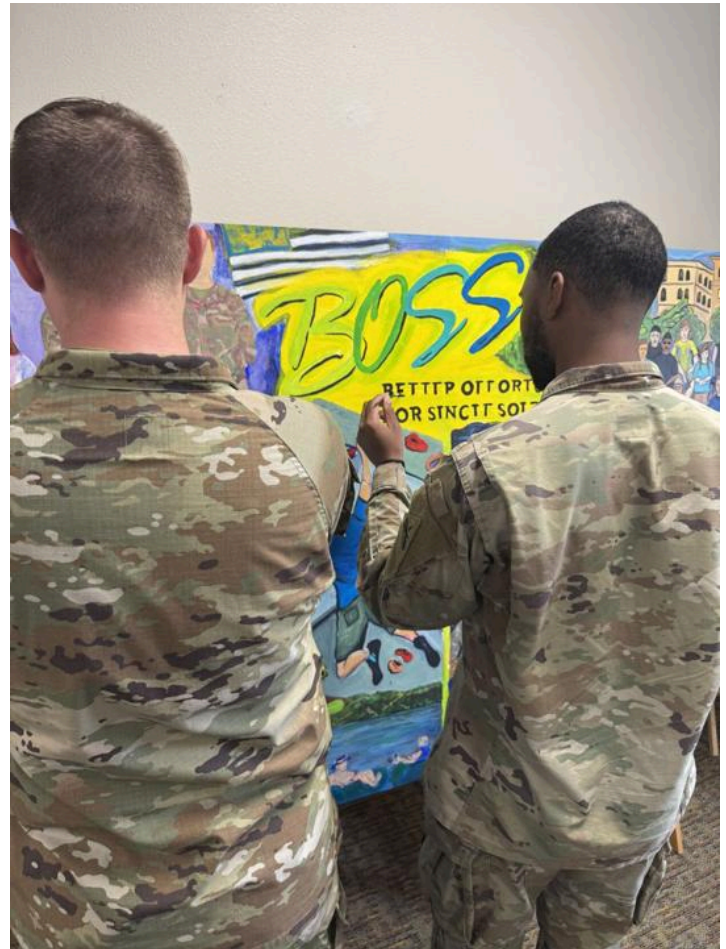


Photo by Gina Lochausen

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