

Quarterly Impact Report

A Letter From Our Founder

We've had a busy few months, facing the challenges most non-profit orgs are facing, while making great strides on key initiatives, including several big firsts.

In the middle of March we welcomed our first Chief Operating Officer, Army veteran Becca Keaty, who brings development experience, deep authenticity, and a background in the arts with her. She's extraordinary, and I hope you get the chance to spend some time with her this year.

Another first: a whitepaper in Military Medicine shows an association between our More Than One Story poetry program and a significant reduction in suicidal ideation. This is an enormous step toward understanding our programs and their impact, with an eye toward making them more effective and adapting and scaling them.

In the middle of May our online platform, launched at the end of 2025, exceeded 500 users. We're proud to host meaningful connections and fully human conversations about art making. The platform also improves our evaluation efforts to better serve our growing community of participants from around the world.

At the end of May, we were honored to present "From Farm to Field," the first solo visual art exhibition by USAF veteran Belena Stuart Marquez. The exhibition will be up through the summer, so if you're able, do check it out.

And you're looking at the final first, our quarterly impact report, an initiative which highlights some of the incredible people, programs, and art of the Mission Belonging community. We hope you'll come to look forward to receiving it each quarter.

See you in a workshop soon.



Seema Reza, CEO



Belena Marques, *Wadi*, 2026, Mixed Media



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Participant Spotlight — Berdj Cekic

"This art community truly changed my life. It helped me meet people, share my artwork, learn about art, and stay connected. The virtual art sessions especially kept me going. Being home during COVID was difficult. Not having a job, transitioning out of the military, and leaving my technician job was rough. Then, after coming to Fort Belvoir for shoulder surgery, I was unexpectedly diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. That was a real shock. The virtual art classes also gave me the confidence and motivation to keep learning.

During COVID, at age 60, I decided to go back to school online and take culinary courses. Today, I am proud to say that I earned my Chef Diploma. But thank God, I learned a lot from other people. We all complain sometimes, especially in the military, but I remember my boss telling me, "Stop complaining, enjoy life, and be happy, because others may have it worse than you." Those words stayed with me. Having the support of friends and family has made a tremendous difference. I really appreciate everything you all do to keep us motivated through art and by simply being there for us. God bless."



Facilitator Spotlight — Cathrine Schmid

Cathrine Schmid is a transgender veteran who served twenty years in the U.S. Army before being forced into retirement in 2025 under coercive policy rather than her own choosing. Now in Baltimore MD, her writing moves through institutional betrayal, queer identity, and the cost of keeping faith with systems that do not keep faith with you. Cathrine is an active member of the Mission Belonging online community, Circle. She currently has created 57 posts, commented 10 times, and is a member of 16 spaces.



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Funder Spotlight ——— **Leslie Hidalgo**

Air Force veteran and artist Lesley Hidalgo first came to Mission Belonging as a participant during a long recovery at Walter Reed, navigating surgeries and the long, uncertain road that follows. Now retired from service, she continues to create by teaching textile and paper arts through community workshops.

Her work has been recognized beyond the workshop room: her art was featured in Mission Belonging's inaugural exhibition at the Hilton Mark Center Alexandria, on display from November 2025 through May 2026. Last month, Lesley hosted a poppy-making class in honor of Memorial Day, inviting participants to create paper and textile poppies while raising funds for Mission Belonging. Her workshop raised \$200 for our work, representing 92 minutes of belonging for a veteran participant.



Leslie said her inspiration came from a Mission Belonging workshop she attended shortly after brain surgery, where the activity was making cherry blossoms from paper. "It was one of the first social activities after my surgery," she said, "and I wanted to take a moment to teach other people what I learned in that class, and give back to the organization that was there for me in that moment."

Lesley's generosity reflects the full arc of the Mission Belonging community from participant to artist to advocate and embodies her philosophy, one she learned during some of her darkest days in recovery: making something beautiful is itself a form of healing.





April - June 2026

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Save the Date: A Day of Belonging

Saturday • 09.19.2026 • Rockwood Manor, Potomac, MD



Mission Belonging's 4th Annual community gathering, A Day of Belonging, returns with this year's theme: Joy. This special event invites Veterans, Active Duty Military, their spouses and caregivers, and community members to come together for a day of connection, creativity, and celebration. It will be a day of professionally-facilitated expressive arts workshops, as well as performances and readings showcasing the work and talent of artists from the military and Veteran communities.

[Register Here](#)

[Watch Video Here](#)



Community Engagement

Elizabeth Dole Convening

Hosted by the Elizabeth Dole Foundation

Good Vibes & Voices Concert and Event

Hosted by Howard County Health Department

Capital Pride

Hosted by SPARTA Pride

Our Stories, Our Truths Tour

Hosted by Minority Veterans of America

