



# women's *View*

**Warrior  
Wellness  
at the  
YMCA**

**Actress  
Recounts A  
Wonderful Life**

**Local Artist  
Creates  
Space for  
Healing**

**SEPT  
2016**

# September Contents 2016

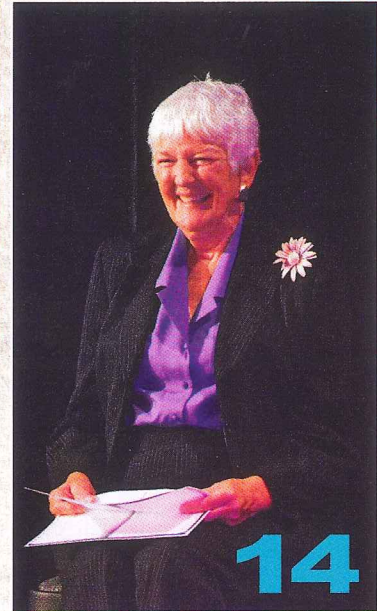
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Cover photo by Eddie Harris.

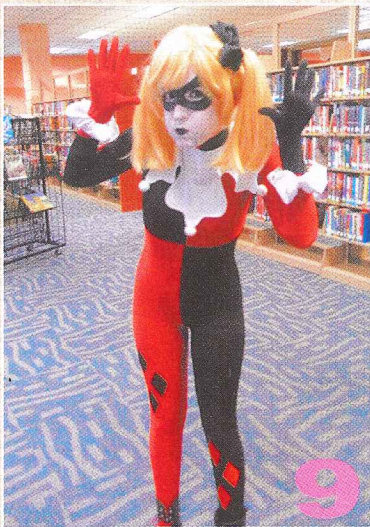
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# Keri So Very



MARKETING & DEVELOPMENT  
MANAGER  
**Keri Dickson**  
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I grew up in a small house, down a long dirt road in the Cash Swamp of South Carolina. My dad was a teacher, my mom stayed home for as many years as she could with us three girls. We didn't have a lot. They had to do the best they could with what they had. I can remember my mom making us girls matching red and white dresses. My younger sister, bless her heart, ended up wearing a red and white dress for YEARS as she grew out of one and into another and then another. One thing I can't recall is any time we didn't have what we needed. Growing up this way certainly taught me a lot about working with what you have.

These lessons came in handy for me as I started raising my own family and especially once I became a single mom. Making purses from old jeans; painting and recovering furniture instead of buying something new; being thankful for hand-me-downs; and even planning meals so that leftovers can be used for the next meal are just a few examples.

In this month's issue we look at working with what you have to ReCycle, RePurpose and Reinvent

your spirit. We talked to a few women who have done just that and are inspirations for others.

Whatever the situation is, our attitude is what directs our path. It's really all about a choice. We can choose to focus on what we don't have and sit around complaining and feeling sorry for ourselves. The alternative is to have a positive attitude and work with what we have. This allows us to turn what was an obstacle into a stepping stone. When we change how we respond to situations, it is amazing to see what doors will open for us and who is willing to hold them open as we find the courage to walk through.

Temple Grandin is such an inspiration to me. Instead of seeing autism as disability, she views it as a gift that allows her to understand things differently. In the award winning semi-biographical movie about her life, there is a scene when she was afraid to walk through an automatic door at a grocery store. She was at a point in life when she was struggling with the hypersensitivity that is a part of her autism. As she stood there in fear, a lady in the store

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held the door open for her. She then acted in courage and walked through the door.

I don't know that my poor retelling of the story captures how immensely this incident and her life inspire me. I will repeat that when we CHOOSE to have a positive attitude and work with what we have, DOORS WILL OPEN. My hope for each of you is that you will choose to work with what you have, overcome obstacles and have the courage to walk through each and every door your positive attitude opens.

*Keri So Very.*

# Tearing Down Walls With Old Army Uniforms

By APRIL OLSEN

'Artist, photographer, educator' is how Trish Brownlee defines her work on a business card. What she actually does cannot be described so succinctly.

"We live in a world about dividing and breaking down," Brownlee recently said while at the Cape Fear Botanical Garden, where she was serving as the Artist-in-Residence this summer.

"Sometimes there can be such a wall to get through the day. This work is about tearing down the walls to let people connect. Through community workshops, we can allow people to connect. I'm trying to create a place through art that allows people to tell their story."

The workshops Brownlee refers to are part of Breaking Rag — a community art project for veterans and their families that assists them in creating their own artwork to communicate their military experience.

Breaking Rag is a term for paper making, referring to the physical process of breaking fibers into pulp, from which the paper is made.

"It is destructive at first," Brownlee said. "And then we put it back together. That's what life is. The good and bad are still there, they look different and we are stronger for it. Breaking rag is a giant metaphor for my life."

Brownlee offers public Breaking Rag demonstrations and workshops, creating paper from worn Army Combat Uniforms, hospital scrubs and denim. The paper can then be used to display photographs, writing or other mixed media to create art that reflects on a life experience or trauma overcome.

The workshops are not limited to military. Brownlee said everybody has experienced some kind of trauma, but not everyone can express it in a productive way.

"Through art, we are able to break through assumptions and stereotypes and find real connection," says Brownlee, who began this work as a way to understand her own experiences, with the goal of communicating the impact of military service on veterans and their families.

Having served just shy of eight years in uniform, Brownlee also worked in civil service and as a contractor in the U.S. and overseas, finally serving as the command photographer at the U.S. Army Special Operations Command at Fort Bragg. After dealing with chronic pain for several years before being diagnosed with fibromyalgia, she finally separated from military and government service

and turned her focus to completing her education.

She's earned a bachelor's in Visual Arts from Fayetteville State University in 2012, and a Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts from Pacific Northwest College of Art in 2015. While continuing her work as an exhibiting mixed-media artist, Brownlee currently teaches visual arts at The Capitol Encore Academy and serves as the school's arts integration facilitator.

Brownlee's recent exhibits include breaking rag pieces incorporated into Cape Fear Regional Theatre's original production of *DOWNRANGE: Voices from the Homefront*. The play follows military couples from courtship to marriage and military life with deployments and struggles. Separations, reunions, heartbreak, and of course, love, are depicted. Some of Brownlee's other art has been exhibited during CFRT's performances of *Ring of Fire* and *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*.

Her undergrad time at FSU was "all about myself and my story — figuring out who I am," she said. In grad school, she learned how to make paper from combat uniforms and saw an opportunity to not only share her story, but help others tell their own.

A self-proclaimed punk rocker, the ever-changing multi-color streaks in her hair fail to disguise Brownlee's sensitive and urgent need to be a force for good.

"I started with myself, and then my husband," Brownlee said. "Doing this work gave us a place to communicate and talk about our experiences." Her husband is a recently separated veteran who worked in communications as a member of a special operations unit on post and has nine deployments in his 13 years of service.

"You have to be willing to talk about the hardest parts of your life," she said. "Once you take control over those traumas, it gives you a place to relate to other people."

Brownlee is open about her struggles and what she has learned from them.

Her ex-husband was an Infantryman. Although their marriage ended, they remained friends and Brownlee witnessed his long-term struggle with pain and recovery after he lost a leg in combat in Iraq. His death last year helped motivate Brownlee to use her gifts as an artist to reach out to others, especially those dealing with wartime experience.



When I've created something that reaches someone,  
I feel like I'm serving my purpose.



Trish Brownlee photo by Eddie Harris.  
Breaking Rag photos by Thomas Keever.

"For a while I felt like I wasn't the right person, I haven't experienced combat," she said. "We have a responsibility... we live in a country that sends people to war. We have to have compassion to take care of each other. I can offer the gifts I have."

Now 32, Brownlee feels a responsibility to be part of the solution when discussing war and conflict and its affects. "It's not my job to make things all better, but it is my job to listen," she said. "I can give them a medium or avenue for talking or creating."

While not everybody feels comfortable with a structured workshop, Brownlee says it does give them a space to slow down and process their experiences and talk about them.

"One thing I notice in the workshop is people talking to each other," she said. "They talk about it while their hands are busy... get those experiences out. If we don't talk about it, people end up isolated."

Through the cathartic physical process of breaking fibers down into pulp and then rebuilding it into paper, veterans are able to create a blank page, something they can use to display part of their story.

This process mirrors Brownlee's own journey as she continues to come to terms with what has shaped her as a person. She said she tries to use what she's gone through, her own battles with anxiety and depression, to help others

feel empowered. Brownlee said she is working on herself as much as she is helping someone else.

"It is not necessarily reinventing yourself but reconciling the worst parts of yourself with the best parts of yourself and recognizing what's important," Brownlee said. "Recognizing what makes me valuable. Learning what are my gifts, what do I have to contribute to the world?"

Brownlee said she and her husband try to share this awareness with their 2-year-old daughter and their 17-year-old adoptive daughter. She feels her role is to help them figure out what their roles are in the world.

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Brownlee said her own growing family, her art, her teaching and her work with other veterans has allowed her to come to terms with her life's journey and use her gifts as an artist to give others a similar opportunity.

"I'm at peace with me and my own experience," she said. "I still struggle with the world... I keep doing what I can with my part of it."

To learn more about Trish Brownlee and how she is using art as a tool for veteran advocacy, visit her website [www.trishbrownlee.com](http://www.trishbrownlee.com).

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