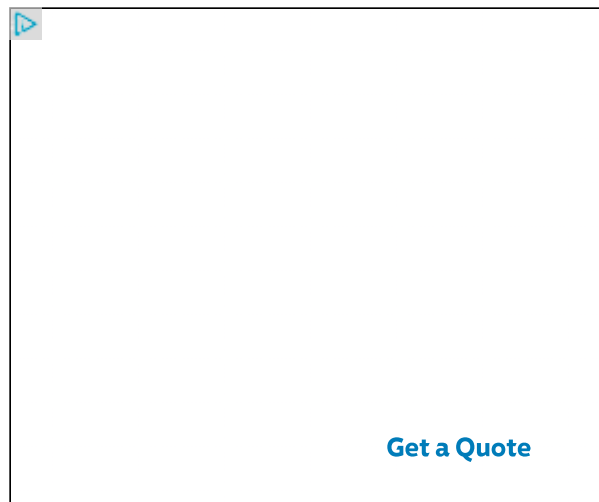


**I** grew up in a household where we were driven to help other people. My grandparents would go out of their way for others, even if it affected their own happiness and prosperity. And so this feeling of needing to be of help to others is probably part of my DNA.

In high school I had a friend who was a ballerina and I was intrigued, so I started taking classes—ballet, tap and jazz. The call of ballet was so interesting because it was so physical and yet so intricate and smart at the same time.

Exit12 Dance Company, which I co-founded in 2007, works predominantly with, and for, veterans of war. Sadly, all our 2020 tours have been cancelled or postponed because of COVID-19.



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-

the pandemic might be affecting veterans who already tend to be isolated and brought four artists together to create online classes for them. These include everything from movement, to writing and mindfulness. We then left a window of time at the end of each class where veterans could talk and connect.

*“After losing two of my Marines to suicide in 2011, I started to develop Exit12's veteran movement workshop.”*



I've been doing this work in the arts and veteran spaces since 2007. What I've found is that when veterans come home from combat, war, or service, they automatically miss the community and camaraderie. They miss that feeling of service and purpose. What we call the "veteran civilian divide" is very prominent.

Some veterans are very good at returning to normal life, but for many it's a struggle. And because of that they often resort to staying at home, possibly self-

Because in training, you learn deadly movements where you might yell "kill" while you learn to strike. The violent movement and your natural reaction to that is deadened somewhat during training. That effect is extremely powerful and it's really hard to get rid of in civilian life.



Román Baca, artist, choreographer and US Marine Iraq War Veteran, pictured in Iraq in 2006.

ROMAN BACA

After losing two of my Marines to suicide in 2011, I started to develop Exit12's veteran movement workshop, *Movement to Contact*. We invite veterans to work with us and go through one of our movement workshops. Initially these were designed to rebuild the feeling of self and a sense of trust and teamwork. But a

workshops allowed them to create, choreograph and think imaginatively, and they would say, "wow! I did that! I wonder what else i could do with my life?"

We had one army veteran who served for the U.S. in the Vietnam War. He would self-report that the army trained him how to kill, that he was a killer, a shell he's been trying to shed his whole life. He came to a couple of our workshops and he did a couple of writing workshops with another veterans' organization. And now in his hometown, he is a peer veteran counsellor.

When I got into dance, I was drawn towards the story ballets that had impact and purpose. At university, we performed a piece by Antony Tudor called *Dark Elegies*. It's a piece where the children in a community die in a tragedy. We interpreted it as them playing on the beach and getting swept away by a huge wave.

The ballet shows parents going through the grief of losing their children. That stayed with me—how dance and theatre were able to communicate that grief. It was very beautiful and moving. But unfortunately, back then, I

*“Being a person who lives in the extremes, I joined the United States Marine Corps in 2000.”*

Sleeping Beauty. And it felt very frivolous.

So that, and the overall societal perception of male dancers, drove me in a different direction. Being a person who lives in the extremes, I joined the United States Marine Corps (USMC) in 2000. I felt that it exhibited those qualities of service, and purpose and learning the tools to fight for those who couldn't fight for themselves.

When I joined, I remember walking into the recruiter's office with my hair dyed red and earrings in both ears, and said I wanted to help people; the recruiter was unfazed. But a couple of the guys that I was training with found out that I was a dancer and one of them never talked to me again. Because of that, I didn't tell anyone again for a long time.

In 2005, we got the call that we were being deployed to Fallujah in Iraq, and we started hearing it was one of the most dangerous places to go. Our operational tempo was very high right when we landed; we were running patrols in the local villages, armed to the teeth. We spent our days looking for the enemy and trying to deter attacks.

were trying to go on with their daily lives. Every altercation we got into, I felt this pull towards wanting to know more about their lives and wanting to help.

Thankfully, my whole platoon felt the same way. Our commanding officers ended up shifting our missions halfway through our deployment to include humanitarian elements. We were bringing food and water to the locals, school supplies to local schools, and trying to develop relationships with the leaders of the local villages. It was something that I was very proud to be a part of. I do feel like we tried our best with the resources we had when we were there.

But when I got home in 2007, there was this pull to get on with life. I had just been through this really life changing experience, and I thought I needed to be a normal, responsible individual. My grandfather was a Korean War veteran, and when he got back from war he married my grandma, bought a house and got a good job. So I thought, "I'll do what Grandpa did."





RACHEL NEVILLE

I got a really good job working for an engineering company, I bought a condo, I got more serious with my girlfriend. I thought I was doing great with my transition until my girlfriend—who is now my wife—sat me down and said, "you're not the person I knew before the war. You used to be vibrant and full of life. And now you're just mean, angry, anxious and depressed."

She asked me, if I could do anything, without having to worry about money or time, what would it be? And I said that I would start dancing again.

Along with some fellow dancers, my wife and I put together some neoclassical ballet pieces and sent them to choreographic competitions. We were rejected by every one, but I would reply and ask for advice.



Stephen Mills, the artistic director of Ballet Austin, Texas was the only one to respond. He gave me three pieces of advice, but the one that sticks out was; "as an artist you have to find your voice. You have to find that one thing that only you can talk about, and that one thing that for you is aching to come out."

And for me that was the military experience. I wanted to create work that would transport audiences to the war zone and show them what movies and the media wasn't showing them—a picture of just being a normal person who is wearing a uniform, carrying a gun and serving in the desert.

I think when we started Exit12, it was to reach out to audiences who had no experience of the military, and to communicate these experiences so that people could be more informed and educated about the reality of military service. As we went along, we realised that we were performing to a lot of veteran audiences.



Román Baca in Fallujah, Iraq during the Iraq War. Baca returned to Iraq in 2012 to host dance workshops with young people.

**ROMAN BACA**

In 2012, I had the opportunity to go back to Iraq and work with young people using choreography and dance. Being able to interact with the culture in a real

Learning about these kids, instructors, translators, and their lives, and being able to go to the mall where they hung out, have dinner with their families or see buildings created in antiquity and still standing—it made me shake my head, and think, if we just opened ourselves up to understanding a bit more, then maybe this perpetual violence would end.

People are now talking about this "war" we're fighting against the pandemic and I think that idea sits in our wheelhouse at Exit12. As an artist, it makes me feel that there's this responsibility to engage with society in a way that is impactful and meaningful, so that's what we are looking at next.

I think the thing that I've been trying to get across in my work in the past 13 years is that individuals who serve in the military are just regular people.

They can be pictured as these mindless robots who do nothing but kill and destroy, and yet when you look a little closer, it's just a cross section of humanity and society. When you zoom in and you look at that soldier, there's a very robust person. That person has hopes and dreams and desires and wants to live a normal life, just like you and I.

*Román Baca, artist, choreographer and U.S. Marine Iraq War Veteran, Fulbright Scholar to the UK and Artistic Director at Exit12 Dance Company in New York City.*

*The views expressed in this article are the writer's own.*

*As told to Jenny Haward*