Art exhibit examines post-traumatic stress disorder

A traveling art exhibit coming to Sacramento State examines post-traumatic stress disorder – its causes and symptoms, its stigma and treatment – through the art and words of those directly affected by it.

“PTSD Nation: Art and Poetry From Survivors of War, Gun Violence and Domestic Abuse” will run Nov. 1-Dec. 13 in the University Library Gallery Annex. A special reception including presentations by some of the artists will be held from 4 to 6 p.m. Saturday, Nov. 1. Regular gallery hours are 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday.

Curated by Diana Bilovsky, who has personal experience with PTSD, the exhibit was created entirely by artists and poets who live with post-traumatic stress disorder.

The exhibit has four goals: to use the illustrated stories to provide a simulated experience of what it is like to acquire and live with PTSD; to educate the public about the disorder and offer tips for survivors, loved ones and society; to help de-stigmatize PTSD by honoring the survivors as the heroes they are; and to encourage the public to work to reduce the incidents of trauma and advocate for universal, compassionate and appropriate treatment of those living with the disorder.

Participating artists have a wide range of experience. Some are new to creating works of art; others have been at it a while.

Jennifer O’Neill Pickering is a popular artist, writer and teacher in Sacramento, as well as a Sacramento State alumna. Her art and poetry have been displayed in local galleries and regional journals, and she is the curator of an annual event, Sable and Quill, that showcases artists who are also writers.

O’Neill Pickering acquired PTSD through early gun violence and domestic abuse. For the exhibit, she is presenting a painting, an assemblage and a narrative poem.

Capt. D. Allen Wyly studied art prior to his military service in Vietnam, the experience that led to his PTSD. He later worked in the insurance industry and as an advocate for the homeless, ex-offenders and the developmentally disabled. Since his retirement, Wyly has returned to art, and the exhibit features two of his acrylic paintings, an evocative charcoal study and a poem.
When asked for the biggest misconception people have about PTSD, Bilovsky doesn’t hesitate: “That it’s a made-up illness or that you can ‘snap out of it.’”

Bilovsky, whose PTSD stems from domestic violence, also illustrates that you can’t judge a person with PTSD by what’s on the outside. She is a very outgoing, seemingly upbeat person who acknowledges that she is one of the more high-functioning people with the disorder. “I sometimes handle it well and sometimes I don’t,” she says. “When I’m by myself, it gets worse, and if someone treats me unkindly or disrespectfully, it can generate thoughts of suicide.”

It has also made her hyper-vigilant – too alert for her surroundings. If a bicyclist zooms past her on the sidewalk, it can terrify her. “My brain’s become a cop for catastrophe,” she says with a laugh.

While PTSD can arise from a number of sources – random violence, domestic abuse, war – the symptoms and the items that can trigger incidents are the same across the board, Bilovsky says. And so the art and poetry help people explain how they feel and serve as therapy itself.

Following the Sac State exhibition, the show goes to Naperville, Ill., then returns to the West Coast for exhibits in San Jose and Eugene, Ore.

For more information on the exhibit, contact Bilovsky at dianablooms@gmail.com. For media assistance, call Sacramento State’s Public Affairs office at (916) 278-6156. – Craig Koscho