



A catbird rests on a branch at Bellevue State Park.

SUBMITTED BY RICHARD ALBERTSON

# DELAWARE

## Mural captures veterans' struggles

Community comes together to create public art on the side of Wilmington facility

TYLISA C JOHNSON THE NEWS JOURNAL

A mural capturing the complex struggle of veterans' transition from the military back into society was dedicated by the Wilmington Renaissance Corporation Tuesday morning in Wilmington.

Titled, "Getting Back to the World," the Veterans Freedom Mural is the first in the creative district and was completed with the help of more than 100 artists, veterans, community members and sponsors. It is located in the 900 block of Washington Str. on the side of Marcella's House, a veterans residential facility.

Eric Okdeh, lead artist, said the mural and other public art has "more potential than just being an image on the wall."

"There are so many things that converge around public art," he said, describing the community building, catharsis and healing that happen during his projects. "I'm always very humbled by the willingness of people to come into a project and share things that are not easy to share."

Okdeh has been a public artist for about 20 years and spent months talking to veterans about their experiences to inspire the mural.

The design depicts the silhouettes of a contemporary returning veteran greeted by a senior veteran. The design also highlights the history and importance of women in the military through imagery of the Women's Army Corps.

The transition for veterans back into society was characterized multiple times as the "most difficult time for veterans."

Matt Meyer, who was a diplomat from 2009 to 2011 and with the army in Mosul, Iraq, during operations Iraqi Freedom and New Dawn, said projects like this are crucial to veterans.

"What they didn't talk about is that things like this are really important in healing," Meyer said. "When you come back, you want people to understand the confusion of the experience of returning and this does an amazing job of that."

Meyer, who is running for New Castle County executive, said the difference in the experience of soldiers transitioning from Iraq and Afghanistan seems to be different, in a good way, from those who served in Vietnam, and that it should be mostly attributed to various healing projects.

Meyer is running against incumbent Tom Gordon, who is trying for an unprecedented fourth term in the Democratic primary. Republican Barry Nahe, chief of building operations and maintenance for New Castle County, is also in the race.

"This is a powerful way to say [thank you]," Meyer said.

Secretary of State Jeff Bullock and Governor Jack Markell also spoke at the dedication about the 85,000 veterans in Delaware and their missions to make life better for veterans who are coming back to civilian life.

Markell described the mural as "powerful" and said he was looking forward to hearing the story behind it and hopes people will take time to truly appreciate it and "take it all in."

He also pointed out the section of the mural that reads, "thank you for your service."

"It's important to thank them for service, but what's more important than the words of thank you, are the actions that you take to demonstrate that the thanks are real," Markell said.

Markell also said that after his 2015 pledge to end veteran homelessness, temporary and permanent housing was found for all but four of the homeless vet-



A mural designed by lead artist Eric Okdeh was dedicated by the Marcella's House in Wilmington on Tuesday morning.

JENNIFER CORBETT/THE NEWS JOURNAL

"Every time you look at it you see something more. So few individuals choose to sacrifice for so many and we're honoring them with this mural."

MAJOR GENERAL FRANK VAVALA,  
ADJUTANT GENERAL OF THE DELAWARE NATIONAL GUARD

erans identified in Delaware. The veteran unemployment rate has also been cut in half from what it was, according to Markell.

"I think that is remarkable progress," Markell said. "I'm grateful to all who had something to do with it, but we need to make sure that it's not just a once a year exercise, but it's something that we keep up."

Mayor Dennis Williams made a short statement about the need for new jobs in the city and left immediately after.

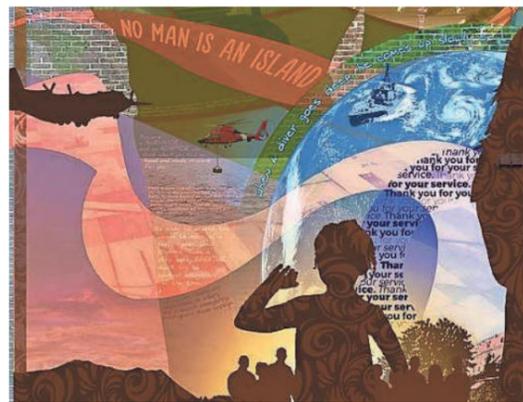
Major General Frank Vavala, adjutant general of the Delaware National Guard, who had a large role in the project, said the mural conveys the "true" veterans experience.

He also said these murals "increase civic involvement and transform our communities for the better."

"Every time you look at it you see something more," Vavala said. "So few individuals choose to sacrifice for so many and we're honoring them with this mural."

The second mural by the creative district will be dedicated in early August.

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SUBMITTED PHOTO

Okdeh has been a public artist for about 20 years and spent months talking to veterans about their experiences to inspire the mural.



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Attendees listen to guest speakers at the dedication of the mural on Tuesday morning.

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