George Orwell said: “We sleep safely in our beds because rough men (and women) stand ready in the night to visit violence on those that would do us harm.” But who then stands ready to take care of those same men and women upon their return when they are all too often disabled, disillusioned, or disheartened? Loved ones expect the same person to return who was seen off to war so many months before. But night terrors and haunting memories often plague vets upon their return. Physical and mental disabilities and instabilities are all too common. You cannot un-ring a bell, and you cannot un-see the sights of war. All too often veterans return home and are unable to find or are simply denied services.

BY ELLA RUE
ILLUSTRATIONS BY VARIOUS ARTISTS AND ILLUSTRATORS
My son, Justin Eyet, served two tours of combat duty. One in 2008-2009 in Iraq and one in 2011-2012 in Afghanistan. He was a 20 year-old National Guardsman when he was assigned to the Army’s 25th Infantry, fighting insurgents in northern Iraq. He saw and experienced things no mother would ever want her son or daughter to see or experience, and returned home with baggage he found great difficulty in handling. When he returned home he was a different person. He was withdrawn and kept to himself. He has attempted to complete his education but has had difficulty concentrating. At some point, and we are unsure where, when or how, he contracted MRSA, a blood infection that if left unattended could be deadly. He bounced in and out of the VA (Veterans Affairs) hospital and on his 26th birthday, while still in medical quarantine, the VA hospital released him suggesting that he find a private rehab to assist him. They instructed us that since they could not ascertain that his condition was related to his military service, the VA was not responsible for his medical treatment. The fact that it was his birthday is of great consequence, as this timing also coincided with the rolling out of the Affordable Care Act, and that he would be removed from my insurance. We were certain there would be no private healthcare rehab that would accept him without insurance, and at that time he hadn’t secured coverage.

I serve on the Board of Trustees of Raritan Valley Community College in Branchburg, New Jersey. As does Bob Wise, CEO and President of Hunterdon Healthcare. I did what any mother in my situation would do. Without shame or reservation I asked Bob Wise if he would help my son. Upon hearing of the situation, without hesitation he said he would be happy to have his top infectious disease specialist care for Justin. We would sort out the coverage later. Thankfully, Justin is now fine and will be fine, as he has parents who have the resources to ensure his health and well-being. Once Justin’s MRSA was in remission it occurred to me: “What of all the other ‘Justins’ who may not have a mother with a connection to a CEO of a medical facility? Who will help them? What of all of the other enlisted men and women who return and are denied services? Who are they to call on for help?” And thus 52 Reasons to Love a Vet was conceived. I returned to Bob Wise’s office yet another time, this time no longer in a panic, but instead excited to pitch a project with the hope that he would see merit in the idea and support it. I had already done a call out to many of my artist friends asking if they would create and donate a piece of original art to be used for a deck of cards, limited posters, and limited books for selling, with the originals being shown at receptions and gallery shows to help raise awareness with the hope of policy change. I was humbled by their responses. Artist after artist responded with a resounding yes, telling me they would be honored and proud to be involved with such a project. The artists were asked to express their personal editorial opinions via an illustration showing their thoughts on the military, patriotism and/or veterans. My hope was that Bob Wise would then authorize a restricted fund and be the grantor for funds solely dedicated to health and education needs for veterans. As I talked and talked,
my voice began to escalate with excitement. Bob sat silently, intently listening. Finally when I seemed to sputter and stammer, running out of steam and anything further to possibly persuade him of the merit of my idea, he responded with a small smile and said that he loved the ingenuity behind the idea, coupled with the creative muscle that came with artists like Joe Ciardiello, Jim Bennett, Victor Juhasz, Gail Anderson, Stephen Gardner, Mike Wimmer and so many others. He immediately agreed to creating a restricted fund and housing it within The Hunterdon Healthcare Foundation.

Bob also explained to me that his brother-in-law, John Wyka, suffered through a lifetime of surgeries and lung therapy treatments due to contracting aspergillosis, a fungal infection indigenous to warm climates like Vietnam, where, as a Marine, he served a tour of duty after high school in the late sixties. Sadly, he died at the age of 63 from the disease two years ago. The day that I found myself pitching this program to him coupled with his brother-in-law’s recent passing gave him reason for pause and to consider that perhaps there was a grander purpose to the two events.

As expected, each artist had offered vastly different responses to the assignment. Stephen Gardner created a mushroom cloud in the shape of the ace of spades. “The nuclear bomb is the ultimate trump card,” he said. Jim Bennett painted an evil king; angry and dropping spades like bombs. Jim explained his choices by saying: “I wanted to show the King as
the iconic ‘War Monger,’ using no particular ruler as reference. His skin color is lifeless, because he has no value for human life. His core has been destroyed, yet he is oblivious to the carnage. I wanted to depict war throughout the ages, which is why I used swords, aircraft, and nuclear clouds.” Political cartoonist, Steve Brodner depicted the red joker with a veteran in a wheelchair holding a laptop with the insidious face of the Joker from *Batman* on the screen with the url of va.gov. Steve explained: “The subject of how we treat our servicemen and women is a vitally important one. But how war is sold to young men and women and what they end up sacrificing as a result is, I feel, a very unfair deal. Only when it is too late, when the flags and bands and ribbons are swept away that they see the truth of it; what war truly is. And the price we all pay. As artists it is our job to tell the truth with clarity and conviction to the best of our ability. It is our job, in this case, to honor the sacrifice while also standing up against the injustices done to our young soldiers who get thrown into the pits of hell every time politicians lack the necessary creativity to avoid war. I believe supporting the troops means more than just giving them meals and meds (which, at times, they have not been given). It is also supporting them against a rising tide of bullshit. Lies, disinformation and disrespect are our greatest enemies as a society. We all need to unite against those as one nation. And only enter into war when absolutely necessary, and as declared by Congress.” Joe Ciardiello illustrated a uniformed soldier with a heart shaped hole in his chest and in his head. “This shows a broken vet,”
he said. “He is physically and mentally damaged—
his heart, his mind and his spirit.” Bri Hermanson
said: “For the Queen of Spades, I wanted to focus
on the difficulties of coming back from service, the
splintering of identity, and the need for empathy and
support. I wanted the interpretation of this piece
to be a bit ambiguous—is she coming back from
service? Or is she trying to pick up the pieces after
losing a loved one? A new chapter is opening, but
the shadows of combat linger.” Dave Keefe, director
of Combat Paper New Jersey said this about his
illustration: “In this pencil drawing I am a newborn
baby held by my mother. She is lovingly looking
toward me as I am looking over her shoulder off the
page into the unknown. An M-4 carbine rifle is slung
over my shoulder and I am vibrating with restless
energy—an energy similar to that which I had when
I took action immediately after 9/11. This image
is a foreshadowing of my decision to become the
Marine that served a combat tour in Iraq. No matter
how great and terrible my war experience was,
and how complex the veteran experience is, it is
something I would never change. For good and bad,
my military experience is a part of my identity.” We
all become who we are because of our experiences.
War and military service becomes threaded through
the fabric of the lives of those who have served.

Without the draft, fewer and fewer Americans are
directly impacted by war and its aftermath. We
currently have the lowest percentage of Americans
serving in the military so the trend has been to

*This page: Queen of Clubs by Yuko Shimizu; King of Hearts by
Mike Wimmer; Overview by Tina LeMay; Jack of Hearts by Jime
Wimmer; King of Clubs by Edel Rodriguez.*

*Opposite page: Joker by Dennis Dittrich.*
redefine the purpose and the role for the National Guard, which originally was created for guarding the nation’s borders and assisting with the aftermath of natural disasters, but now we find our guardsmen and women doing multiple tours of duty in the Middle East, and when they return we have been ill-prepared to care properly for them. So instead of welcoming them home in the manner in which they deserve, showering them with respect, resources, and the means to successfully reintegrate into society, we brush them and their ever-growing needs under the rug, resulting in a startling surge of suicide statistics. As Mike Wimmer says about his illustration: “My ‘King of Hearts’ has become the ‘King of Broken Hearts’ and serves as a visual metaphor on a game that has only losers.” Beautifully depicted and sorrowfully true.

As a society, we should be compelled to rectify the problem of underfunding and under-resourcing our veterans. The 52 Reasons to Love a Vet restricted fund aims to do just that. This fund solely benefits veterans by financially assisting them in furthering their education and/or assisting with medical, dental or mental health resources. It’s an attempt to right the wrongs our society continues to inflict on those who served. Limited edition playing cards, signed prints and limited edition books are available for sale, with proceeds benefitting this fund. It may not fix the entire problem, but it does at least create a long overdue conversation. And with each artist’s contribution we get one step closer to properly supporting those who risked their lives for their country. As Victor Juhasz said about his participation with this project: “We can’t all be warriors, but we can contribute our talents.”

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION ABOUT 52 REASONS TO LOVE A VET PLEASE VISIT WWW.52REASONSTOLOVEAVET.ORG.

THE ORIGINAL ARTWORK FOR THE 52 REASONS TO LOVE A VET PROJECT WILL BE ON DISPLAY FOR TEN WEEKS AT THE NORMAN ROCKWELL MUSEUM IN STOCKBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS WITH AN OPENING RECEPTION ON NOVEMBER 7, 2015.