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LITTLETON

Veterans Reading Program To Launch

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A 14-week reading and discussion program for area veterans is about to launch in Littleton and it will use classic literature as a way to help those who served overcome combat trauma, readjust to civilian life, and share a common experience.

"It's creating a usable past," said Kathy Mathis, the program's coordinator with N.H. Humanities, said Thursday. "It helps veterans put some distance between themselves and the raw experience of being in combat, being in war."

The free program, sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities, N.H. Humanities, and Dartmouth College, will be held on Mondays from 6:30 p.m. to 8 p.m. at the Littleton Public Library.

The reading and discussion of the nearly 3,000-year-old ancient Greek classic "The Odyssey," which chronicles the battles and adventures of Odysseus and his epic 10-year journey home, is scheduled to run Sept. 12 through Nov. 14.

The reading and discussion of "The Road Back," the 1931 classic by German author and World War I veteran Erich Maria Remarque about the challenges of German

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soldiers reintegrating back into society after the war, is scheduled to run from Feb. 27 to March 20.

Odysseus' journey home from the Trojan War has much to tell today's combat veterans about the challenges of coming home, said Mathis.

"The Odyssey" can reveal timeless truths about trauma and stress, personal sacrifice, and readjustment, she said.

"We go back 3,000 years," said Mathis. "The text is always a safe place to land and veterans today can use it as a metaphor. A lot of veterans don't think anyone can understand what they've gone through, or are ashamed or embarrassed, and don't know how to talk about their experiences and war. It's a mythic text, but has universal truths. It has all the issues of trauma and homecoming."

The discussion groups are not therapy groups, but another way of healing and returning to a sense of belonging, she said.

"It's not to be the end all, but it is another approach," said Mathis. "It's allowing those memories and stories to be reworked in a group setting where it's safe."

The program's facilitators also seek to get the non-military public involved, she said.

"We want to break down the civilian-military divide," said Mathis. "Civilians need this just as much as veterans. We have no draft so very few people are connected to a veteran. It's important for civilians to have some experi-

ence of what war entails and what they bring back with them. Unless you are a family member of a veteran, you don't know.

The reading and discussion groups on the experience of war and homecoming will be led by facilitator teams of veterans, clinicians, and content experts, and free copies of the books will be provided to participants.

While the target veteran audience is those who served in the nation's most recent wars, in Iraq and Afghanistan, the program is open to all veterans, said Mathis.

"It is very veterans-centric," she said. "We had veterans consulting on the book choices, facilitating, and helping to evaluate the program. We really want veterans to be in this from the ground up."

The program, at least the way it is being done in N.H., is unique and is not being done in other states, said Mathis.

It is the brainchild of Roberta Stewart, professor of classics at Dartmouth College, who nine years ago started a reading program for veterans in the Upper Valley.

Stewart wanted to further develop a curriculum for veterans from the literature she knew. So she wrote the competitive grant proposal for the National Endowment of the Humanities, which made the N.H. reading and discussion program possible.

Unlike movies, books have a longer-lasting impact, Stewart said Friday.

"With a book, you develop a relationship with the author and with the characters," she said. "I think that's where life patterns can

change."

Of "The Odyssey," Stewart said, "Odysseus is complicated, as most human beings are. He is a hero who sometimes behaves less than heroically. With all of these qualities, I think you get a big heavy dose of empathy."

Stewart credits the Dartmouth undergraduate veterans for "doing the heavy lifting" and acting as consultants and co-facilitators as the program's curriculum evolved.

What will be presented in Littleton was a year and a half in the planning, said Mathis.

Littleton is one of four locations the program will be held in N.H. and the only one in the North Country.

The other locations are Great Bay Community College in Portsmouth, the Currier Museum of Art in Manchester, and the Howe Central Library in Hanover.

In the North Country, local veterans are intrigued by the idea and feel it will be beneficial.

"It sounds very interesting," Vietnam veteran and past Littleton Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 816 commander Dan Greenlaw said Friday. "A lot of veterans don't go for any counseling or help until years later, if at all."

And any effort made to bridge the military-civilian gap would be a good thing and would give the public a better understanding of what members of the military experience, said Greenlaw.

Registration for the program is required and those interested can register at www.nhhumanities.org.

For more information, call N.H. Humanities at 603-224-4071.