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# THE FACE OF TRAUMA

Artist and first responder Teresa Coulter explores mental health issues, like PTSD, through painting.



Teresa Coulter, surrounded by her work inside her northwest Calgary studio.

**THERE'S A HALF-FINISHED** oil portrait in Teresa Coulter's Bowness studio of a bearded man with sad eyes. It's the second time Coulter has painted this man, who was the first subject for Coulter's Sock Drawer Stories series, a dozen portraits of first responders dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder. Now, he's returned to sit for a new series.

Coulter and her subject are both paramedics, and both have struggled with PTSD-related issues like insomnia, anger and withdrawal. Coulter says the intense nature of the job makes it easy to lose ties with the outside community — and isolation makes it harder to manage stress and trauma. She was 22 when she first put on her primary care paramedic uniform in 2003. Soon, work consumed her life. Art had always been a release, but she didn't pick up a paintbrush for years.

In 2009, Coulter realized she wanted to rediscover her artistic side, and she responded to a want ad for a painter's model.

**“***I wanted to know what PTSD was, but I wanted to hear from the individuals, not from what some book told me.”*

The artist she sat for mentored and encouraged her as she began exploring her experiences and emotions through her own work. At the same time, she was learning all she could about mental health from courses and books, but she wanted a more direct understanding. “I wanted to know what PTSD was, but I wanted to hear from the individuals, not from what some book told me,” she says.

Coulter put out a call for portrait subjects in 2014, inviting fellow first responders to sit for her and share their stories. Some were shy, but all of her sitters were willing to be vulnerable. It helped that she was a peer. “Every single one of them removed their mask for me,” she says.

The Sock Drawer Stories series has been shown across the province and earned Coulter the ATB Financial Healing Through The Arts Award in 2017. Today, she's reduced her paramedic work to part-time and helps to educate colleagues on mental health through the training program R2MR (Road to Mental Readiness). She's also become a yoga teacher. But the rest of her time is devoted to art, which she feels helps her to manage her role as a first responder. “Art gives me the ability to observe without judgment,” she says. “When I'm [on duty] in crisis situations, I can step back and observe the events that are happening in front of me.”

Coulter says her sad-eyed subject is doing better today than he was the last time he came to her studio. They both are. She's not sure what shape the new portrait series will take, but it may address the subject that occupies her mind now: post-traumatic growth. **■**