

## **Support the mission of Operation Valor Arts**

Dear **Name**,

Dozens of worthy organizations throughout the country focus on the healthcare, rehabilitation and job readiness of our veterans. At Operation Valor Arts, we believe an equally fundamental need is being overlooked – the desire to continue serving.

At OVArts, we offer Veterans the necessary resources to design and construct public art as a means to process their experience of war, engage with fellow service members on a new mission, and create a lasting tribute to the service members and families who made the ultimate sacrifice.

As the only non-therapy-based cultural arts and design program for Veterans, OVArts is committed to helping Veterans who are transitioning into civilian life demonstrate their exceptional abilities. By completing a project with OVArts, our Veterans employ their uncommon ingenuity, adaptability and leadership skills while connecting with opportunities in the arts, design and technology fields.

### **The pilot project**

Sgt. Thomas Edward Vandling Jr. gave his life for his country during his second tour in Iraq in 2007. A Veteran Design Team, made up of soldiers from Sgt. Vandling's unit, has been charged with giving physical form to their collective experience of war and ensuring Sgt. Vandling's enduring legacy.

The resulting artwork will be installed at McGarity Army Reserve Center along with an Honor Garden, where visitors can gather as a community or pause for quiet individual reflection.

The pilot project, while not a memorial to Sgt. Vandling, will ultimately be dedicated to his memory.

To donate to OVArts and learn more about the project, please visit [ovarts.org](http://ovarts.org).

Thank you in advance for supporting the mission of OVArts and allowing the Veterans themselves to create the public art that tells their story.

Sincerely,

**Name**

**Title**

Operation Valor Arts

## **From a friend**

The world knows Sgt. Thomas Edward Vandling Jr., the 26-year-old soldier who joined the Army Reserves in 2001 and was assigned to the 303<sup>rd</sup> Psychological Operations Company in Oakdale, Pa., who served two tours in Iraq in support of the Global War on Terrorism and earned more than 20 awards and medals.

I knew Tommy.

Tommy (not Tom, not Thomas) would do anything for a friend. He knew how to tell a joke and keep a secret. He had a 2nd degree blackbelt in tai kwon do and a way of laughing at you when you cried that made you laugh, too. He loved, and infuriated, his family (as only a brother can). He adored children. He read Nostradamus. He wore the same red baseball cap nearly every day for years and refused to wash it. He hated having his picture taken but had the most infectious smile.

On January 1, 2007, the Sgt. Vandling the country counted on and the Tommy I knew collided.

He was serving his second tour in Iraq, driving a Humvee just south of Baghdad, when he noticed fresh asphalt, a telltale sign of a roadside bomb. He swerved. The explosion killed him anyway.

It's been 10 years now. Ten years without seeing that smile, without hearing that laugh, without feeling that hand teasingly palm my head like a basketball. Tommy didn't get to see his little sister graduate from college, his initials glued in sequins on her cap. He never met his niece. He would have spoiled her rotten.

With every January 1 that passes, my fear is that Tommy will slip a little further away, that the memories we made will get fuzzy, that time, while it helps to dull the pain of his absence, will also dampen the feeling of his presence.

Operation Valor Arts is helping to assuage that fear.

With your support, a veteran design team made up of nine soldiers who served with Tommy will construct a piece of public art inspired by who he was and what he did. That art will live at the McGarity Army Reserve Center in Moon Township.

It will commemorate the sacrifice Sgt. Vandling made for his country and honor the service of all soldiers like him.

But for those of us who knew Tommy, it will also ensure that he always has a place in this world, where he was so loved.

—April Johnston