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Side FX band helps U.S. military veterans take the edge off

A Washington-based band is visiting South Florida to perform for special guests: U.S veterans.

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For Washington, D.C.-based singer and songwriter Kim Cameron, her career as an artist has had one focus: U.S. veterans.

After more than two years of volunteering her band to perform for veterans along the East Coast, she is now making a stop in Miami.

“What started off as a single idea has really grown,” Cameron said. “And when they feel being almost locked up in a hospital, even if it’s for an evening, I’m giving them a way to get out.”

Cameron’s band, Side FX, will perform for veterans Monday at the Miami Veterans Medical Center, 1201 NW 16th St. The performance is not open to the general public, but guests visiting patients and veterans not staying at the hospital are welcome to attend, according to center officials.

Side FX will also perform later that night at Tobacco Road; that performance is free and open to the public.

For the staff at the veterans center, the show will bring a little bit of joy to those who are currently staying at the hospital. There is an average of 250 patients at any given moment, from 20-year-olds who recently got back from deployment to older veterans.

“We don’t have as many inpatients, but for those who are here, anything that breaks the routine and gets them in touch with the outside community is enjoyed, looked forward to and appreciated,” said Larry Gilstad, a media chief at Miami VA Center. “Any activity like this is welcomed with open hearts.”

The show also brings a little piece of home to the patients at the hospital, and entertainment is important to veterans recuperating from physical and emotional injuries, said Tabitha Aragon, a recreational therapist at the center for the past six years.

“That's what the recreation therapist department is always trying to do -- bring the community to them as much as possible,” Aragon said. “To have an actual live band reminds them of when they were out on their own, and to know the band is volunteering their time, it really gives them a sense of pride and that the public cares, so they love it.”

Cameron, 43, started her movement to help veterans forget about the war about two years ago, when she met a soldier on a plane to Washington who was coming back from Iraq after a second Middle East tour.

“What struck me was that he was a college graduate, very smart, and could have easily taken an easy route with a corporate job. He said he wanted to serve the country because he felt it was something he wanted to do personally,” said Cameron. “But after all the work, he said, getting injured and coming back, nothing had changed. He said nothing he had done seemed to matter, and it just struck my soul.”

It was after she got off that plane that she decided to write a song about what she heard, she said. The song, titled *My Hero*, includes the lyrics:

“His courage & strength.

Kept us safe.

Can scars heal a nation?

What would that take?”

Ever since, she's worked with the Veterans Administration volunteer network and has played at different veterans centers like the Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington. Side FX, of which Cameron is the lead singer and is accompanied by five other members, is self-described as an alternative pop band. It was formed in 2008, and during its current tour, the band will also perform a concert at a Davie venue and at the Bay Pines Veteran Hospital on the Gulf Coast of Florida.

“These are probably the most rewarding experiences I've had in my entire life,” Cameron said.