

Operation Oliver

B. R. McDonald



Oliver Mural Group Photo

“Baltimore is the safest city I’ve lived in for the last ten years.” That is my first response to anyone who cites crime, drugs, and a failing city when questioning my decision to engage under-served neighborhoods in Baltimore City. To be fair, the other cities include Kandahar, Baghdad, Peshawar, and Islamabad (just to name a few), and represent seven years in the Army, three years as an Intelligence Consultant, and seven combat deployments.

As a veteran, I have been fighting a war since 9/11 that has taken my skills as a linguist, intelligence professional, and special operator to communities and neighborhoods on the other side of the world. Yet, I return after every trip to see the city I live in needing the same attention and care I spent the last decade giving to people I will probably never see again.

Why do people thank me for my service? I understand why people say it, and I appreciate the intent because I, too, am very proud of my time in the Army.

However, what I want them to ask is, “What are you doing to continue to serve?” Most veterans will say of their service that they wanted to be a part of something larger than themselves. I know that was definitely the case in my decision to step away from being an actor/singer and to become an Arabic linguist. That mindset doesn’t just end after you “get out” of the military. There is often the stigma associated with veterans returning from combat that we all suffer from some form of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or we don’t have the tools necessary to properly reintegrate back into society. Not only is that not true for the majority of veterans, but it also doesn’t acknowledge the tremendous skill set which can be applied to our communities back home.



Operation: Oliver

My fellow Baltimore-based veterans and I are proving the concept of a Veteran Sponsored Community (VSC) and have the necessary drive and perspective to help transform under-served neighborhoods of this great city. It's not because we have the secret or because we know something the rest of Baltimore doesn't, but rather, we aren't afraid of the consequences of taking the first step. We recognize the need for action instead of simply talking about it.



Rich Blake, Former Executive Director of The 6th Branch (T6B)

On October 1, 2011, fellow veterans and I from the 6th Branch (T6B) began proving the VSC concept by launching *Operation: Oliver*. This is a one-year, aggressive service project in the East Baltimore neighborhood of Oliver, a community known for its crime and drugs, and made famous by television's *The Wire*. Under the direction of Executive Director and former Marine Rich Blake, and through local partnerships, T6B launched the first of four major service projects that would be augmented by ongoing efforts in the community.

This is not a one-off project or a drive-by public relations stunt. In order to make this work, the community has to be engaged in the successful transformation of this neighborhood. We reached out to find local veterans who wanted to be part of this project and found Earl Johnson, a former Army ranger and Executive Director of *One Green Home at a Time*, whose mission of physical renovation is directly tied to social activism and creating a safe and livable environment for the Oliver residents.

Another important aspect to *Operation: Oliver* is the creative component of leaving a positive, lasting impact on the community. Who knew military veterans would lead this effort as well? When I got out of the military three years ago, my first instinct was to create a way to combine my two worlds of the arts and the military. I founded the *Veteran Artist Program (VAP)* in an effort to give artists who are veterans an opportunity to showcase their skill sets in the mainstream creative arts community.

VAP artist Jake Warford and *Baltimore Love Project* muralist Michael Owen teamed up with boys from Baltimore Born, an Oliver-based after-school program for boys, to design and paint a mural that represents the growth and opportunity in Oliver. These two artists teamed up again on October 1, 2011, for another mural in the Oliver community.

At the core of VSC is an intentional effort to collaborate and desire to put the community ahead of short-term individual or organizational goals. We cannot do this alone and are asking for your help. Whether you are a civilian, veteran, or active-duty service member, there is a place for you in *Operation: Oliver*. If you like to get your hands dirty, there is plenty of work for you to do on the ground in Oliver. If you are a business or organization whose mission fits with our goals, we want to partner with you. A better future is formed when the ceiling is raised and opportunity is formed for all citizens of Baltimore. As a veteran, I am taking up that challenge, and I ask you to join me.

www.VeteranArtistProgram.org

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