



Musician Sylvester Donald Credits SIUE Veterans Upward Bound for Helping Him Strike a Good Note

by Patricia Merritt

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EDWARDSVILLE – The soundtrack for musician Sylvester Donald’s life has been interspersed – and at times heavily so – with the “blues.” However, the 63-year-old gladly shares that the chords now in play are ones that are upbeat and uplifting, thanks in part to Southern Illinois University Edwardsville Veterans Upward Bound (VUB).

“Besides my music, I’m interested in going back to college, which is why I was excited to learn about Veterans Upward Bound at the SIUE East St. Louis Center, and how they could help me,” said the Army veteran. “My life is not over. I want to get a two-year degree and become a counselor for young people.”

“I want to help youth find their way, because there are so many of them who need support in what they want to pursue,” added Donald. “Then there are those who don’t know what it is they want to do.”

To understand this refrain that has become dominant in the musician’s life, Donald goes back to an earlier time in his life and begins there.

“I was blessed and fortunate that at the age of 10, I knew what I wanted to do when I saw the Jackson 5 singing group on television,” he explained. “I wanted to be an entertainer, and I begged for three months to get a guitar and amplifier. I started playing the guitar at the age of 11.”

Donald graduated from East St. Louis Senior High School in 1979 and studied for two years at Illinois State University in Normal. Donald had friends from East St. Louis who lived in California and said the state would be a good place for him to pursue a music career. Yielding to this advice, the young adult left college and the area to do just that.

“Music has always been with me,” he said. “I’m a versatile musician. My expertise encompasses vocals, the guitar and drums.”

By day, Donald worked a series of jobs such as a sales associate in men’s clothing stores, a bank clerk and janitorial work. But by night, he sought out musical gigs and was on call as a musician for such artists as The Temptations, Barry White, Ray Parker Jr. and Public Enemy.

While in California, Donald met and married his wife. But his marriage ended after five years.

“I was really upset after my divorce,” shared Donald, “because my marriage was supposed to have lasted. I didn’t know what to do for a while.”

Emotionally, Donald was in a bad place and considered selling drugs. However, he thought better of it and decided a productive choice would be to join the military. Donald enlisted in the Army at Fort Bragg, N.C. at the age of 28.

“I was in the Saudi Arabia from 1990-91,” he said. “I worked in the motor pool department in a war area. I was right there listening to everything. I would pray, ‘Please, Lord, don’t let me die. But if I do, please let me finish writing these songs that I have in my head.’”

Donald was honorably discharged from the Army in 1993 and moved to Las Vegas, where he lived for 17 years. Dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) because of the Army, an assortment of hard, seemingly dead-end jobs and musical aspirations that felt far away, made those years difficult. Donald even contemplated ending his life.

Again, good judgment ended up on top, and Donald went to a show that featured the funk rock band, Morris Day and The Time. He maneuvered backstage for the “umpteenth” time and began selling himself as a talented, experienced musician to one of the managers.

“I was called a month later,” he said. “My first show with Morris Day and the Time was in Milwaukee, Wisc.”

Donald moved back to East St. Louis in November 2017 and has been working as a certified nurse’s assistant (CNA).

“I’m glad I didn’t take my life,” continued Donald. “It’s a big world with lots of opportunities. That’s what I want young people to know. I have 150 original songs that I have written. My music genre is inspirational and rhythm and blues. I’m working on my first recording now. I also have a seven-piece band I’m putting together called Sly Shizzle.”

“I want to encourage young people to not give up,” he said. “I’m grateful I’m here today.”

Donald added that he’s also thankful to VUB, as it is providing him with valuable information on shaping his new career goals.

"Sylvester Donald's passion for music and helping youth is his calling," said VUB Program Coordinator Dominique Bibbs. "I suggested he pursue mentoring young people, because I saw that it would be a great opportunity for him. He is a person who has lived so many lives and can help young people find their passion and purpose."

“Veterans Upward Bound strives to help our vets reach their academic goals and personal desires in life,” she continued. “Through VUB, Mr. Donald was able to use COMFIT, an educational program we use to help our veterans review their mathematical and literacy skills. This gives our veterans the confidence to enter the classroom.”

“I am currently in the process with Mr. Donald to find the best program that will fulfill his goals,” explained Bibbs. “He is excited about his music, getting a degree and helping the youth.”

“I’m going to step out on my own, musically,” shared Donald. “It’s something I’ve always wanted to do. Then I want to be a help to others, especially young people. All along, God knew what he had for me, and how he wanted to use me.”

The [SIUE Veterans Upward Bound Program](#) is funded by a grant from the United States Department of Education. First generation and/or low-income veterans of all eras are provided, free of charge, assessment, encouragement and educational skill enhancement through mentoring, instructing and advising. The program serves eligible veterans in the Illinois counties of Madison, St. Clair and Monroe, as well as St. Louis City, St. Louis County and St. Charles County in Missouri.