



SECOND CAREER Sgt. Jamil Brown at a film and video training program.

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Wounded, and Sharing War Stories

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SOME wounded soldiers can and will assess the human costs of war and tell us civilians, so distant from the fray, what it is really like in Iraq and Afghanistan. Cpl. Phillip Levine, now medically retired from the Marine Corps, says it depends on the marine. “Some just can’t or won’t talk about it. I don’t mind. Sometimes it helps.”

This is why he and two fellow marines have agreed to speak on Sunday morning in a Veterans Day forum at Trinity Episcopal Church here. They come at the invitation of the Rev. Nicholas T. Porter, who has previously had imams, rabbis and Richard W. Murphy, an assistant secretary of state in the Reagan administration, address his congregants.

Father Porter, who holds two advanced degrees in Middle East studies, expects that the program will be as well attended and as passionately engaging as the previous ones. He began integrating hot-button forums on Islam, politics and the war in Iraq with traditional worship in Southport as part of what he calls “a Lazarus ministry,” to revive a dwindling congregation. Since he arrived in 2005, membership has more than tripled to more than 300.

“People are thirsty for real news,” he said. “They’re keen to inquire more deeply beyond managed information. Americans feel a huge distance from events in the Middle East. And they want to be able to ask questions directly, of someone who truly knows.”

Also fielding the congregants’ queries on Sunday will be Cpl. Joshua Frey, who was hit in the face with shrapnel and suffered a traumatic brain injury, and Will Pearsall, a rangy, 6-foot-8 staff sergeant who was shot in the stomach by a sniper aiming for a gap in his ill-fitting body armor. Corporal Levine was shot at close range while doing a back sweep — rechecking homes for insurgents — in Falluja during Operation Phantom Fury, one of the bloodiest engagements of late 2004.

“The guy that shot me was just a few feet away,” said Corporal Levine, a Bronx native who left film school at New York University to enlist just before 9/11. “It was Dec. 23, the last firefight of that operation,” he said in a phone interview from San Diego. He recently had his seventh operation at the Naval Medical Center there to repair the shattered nerves in his shoulder.

Among them, the three marines have four Purple Hearts and a host of scars and disabilities. And in January, all three will be in the inaugural class of a new training program for wounded soldiers. The Center for Careers in Media is currently taking shape in a warehouse on a film studio lot north of San Diego, near Camp Pendleton and its medical facilities.

Financed by individual and corporate donations and sanctioned by the Marine Corps, the 10-week program is administered by the nonprofit Wounded Marine Career Foundation. The training will prepare wounded soldiers for a second career in film, video, sound design, graphics and photojournalism.

Courses will be taught by more than 30 film industry professionals; graduates will receive camera equipment, computers and software — some of it modified to accommodate those with disabilities — as well as union membership and job placement. The San Diego SWAT Team, which trains on the film lot, will work with the students on video and forensics training. “A lot of people go into law enforcement after the military,” Corporal Levine said. “With this, soldiers with disabilities won’t be shut out of that option if they have skills in videography and forensics work.”

The center is the brainchild of two Trinity congregants, Judith Ann Paixao and her husband, Kevin A. Lombard, a documentary filmmaker. The pair first spent time with wounded marines at the suggestion of a hospital worker, intending to make a documentary on how they were adjusting to their new lives.

“But I realized two things early on,” Mr. Lombard said. “First, it wasn’t our story to tell. It was the soldiers’. And it was clear that marines are most comfortable talking with one another. Why not teach them basic skills, give them cameras and let them document their own experiences?”

Corporal Levine, who has worked closely with the couple for the past year to help start the center, says he thinks that the program can also serve as a kind of therapy: “We’ve found that guys who can’t even talk to doctors or psychiatrists are finally able to put what they’re going through in words — as long as other marines are running the camera.”

A short video, “I Love My Scars,” filmed by Mr. Lombard and Corporal Levine, delivers eloquent, searing testimony by some remarkable young men. It has served as a compelling fund-raising tool for Ms. Paixao and Mr. Lombard, who have spent most of the last year shuttling among Connecticut, the Pentagon, Quantico and Camp Pendleton to get the program approved by the military and secure private funds.

Ms. Paixao, a former real estate developer, has “discovered a whole new set of crazy skills,” including the ability to woo military leaders like Gen. Paul X. Kelley, the retired Marine Corps commandant and member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, as board members. Alongside contractors and marines, Ms. Paixao has also been helping retrofit the warehouse with wider doorways for wheelchairs.

“Before I met Judith and Kev, I didn’t really think of a future or a career,” Corporal Levine said. “I just thought from surgery to surgery.”

He has physical therapy five times a week, and recently found out that he will need an eighth operation. “It’s O.K.,” he said. “The shoulder could be a problem with camera work, but I’m most interested in editing.”

On Sunday, Father Porter expects to offer prayers of thanksgiving for these service members’ returning from “a highly corrosive environment.” He said he would be joined by many parishioners who have friends and relatives stationed in the Middle East. He and his wife, Dorothy, have three nephews who have been deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan. One came home recently to recover from burns suffered when gas tanks exploded, and is now back on active duty.

“I understand these soldiers in almost a sacramental sense,” Father Porter said. “These soldiers are us. They fought. But our nation is fighting now. Our nation is still being wounded for years to come.

“The way these soldiers understand life after this war — and how they are treated — is how life will be for this nation. And we would do well to listen to what they have to say.”

Corporal Levine and his buddies will continue to bear witness, and forge new lives. “I just can’t wait to get going,” he said, looking forward to a time when weakened nerves and limbs will be augmented by the larger power of the lens.

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