

December 2, 2009

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Andrea Buchanan

Posted: November 25, 2009 12:02 PM

New Beginnings With A Purple Heart

I was asked to sit on a panel at the *Texas Women's Conference* hosted by the first lady Ms. Perry. The topic of discussion was Second Chances and New Beginnings. The audience was large, about 800 women, and they seemed engaged. I found myself speaking from personal experiences about what it means to start over in life. We all have to encounter this moment and face it head on, whether it is out of design, or survival. And then, later that evening, I was introduced to a U.S. Marine and everything I believed about new beginnings and second chances changed. My soulful optimism was sliced in half by this young man and I am grateful for it. I have been walking around, somewhat blind, and he switched on the light for me even though what I see is enough to make me want to turn it off again.

Corporal Chad Owens is a 27-year old Marine who fought in the Iraq war. His lifelong dream was have a career in the military and to fight for his country. When he was 19 years old, he saw the twin towers come down and he knew his dream HAD to become a reality. So he enlisted.

On his first tour of duty, he fell asleep on an airplane and woke up in Baghdad amidst the toppling of Saddam's regime. His battalion was the first to arrive in Baghdad Square when the streets were filled with rioters and he saw the infamous statue topple to the ground. At 22 years old he was storming Saddam's castle, bursting through the opulent marble filled rooms, gun drawn prepared to fire against the enemy. He told me that the bizarrely decorated kid's rooms had Britney Spears, J-Lo and Harry Potter posters on the walls. These were details I couldn't comprehend considering the vehement hatred by Islamic extremists of our gluttonous celebrity filled culture who practice witchcraft, love yo-yo dieting and regular trips to the tanning salon. Interesting that they would then adorn their walls with the very things they hate about us.

Chad is a friend, of one of my closest friends, Resa Wing. She and her husband, John Wing an Army fighter pilot who served in Vietnam, founded Operation Grateful Nation, a nonprofit dedicated to matching up disabled veterans with mentors who can help them pursue careers, complete their education or get the services they need to become successful. Through their wonderful work they met Chad and they have become family.

We met up with Chad, at an outdoor Cantina, the day after Veteran's Day. He had just come from the VA hospital in Houston trying to track down a doctor who could help him with his **PTSD** (post traumatic stress disorder) symptoms. At first I noticed his bright blue eyes and his big smile as he walked up to our table. And then I saw his bionic legs. He lost both of them when a roadside bomb exploded turning his Humvee into a bowl of spaghetti on his second tour of duty. He remembers nothing, thank God, until he woke up in a German hospital a month later with two collapsed lungs, a broken jaw, 200 pieces of Shrapnel, some of which you can still see on his face, and a piece of the carburetor imbedded in his neck. He flat lined twice on the operating table, and his mother was called to Germany for his last rites. But Chad was meant to be here. His second chance and third chance given to him in that hospital five years ago.

The mariachi music was playing as I squeezed my lime into my beer and listened to Chad talk about the VA. Here's where you might get really pissed off, at least I hope you do. He not only lost his legs, but it took him four

years to get a second prosthetic. It was his second leg that kept getting infected and the doctors kept cutting more of his bone to fix what they thought was broken instead of treating the infection. What's left is a small stump that makes the prosthetic incredibly painful. Forty surgeries and countless doctors later, you might think his suffering would be over, but in many ways it's just beginning. While most of the physical ailments have FINALLY been treated, the mental and emotional have not.

His cry for help has not been heard. When he seeks psychiatric care for his **PTSD**.... symptoms include migraines, insomnia, no appetite, chronic fatigue, horrible nightmares, inability to finish a thought, highly emotional and volatile, hopelessness, the VA has no protocol for him. He's been shuffled around from doctor to doctor and each time he thinks he's found the therapist for him they assign him to someone else. His latest therapist was a pregnant civilian who, by all accounts, had never been in combat. The day I met him, he wept because he feels he's done his part and he's being set aside. He talked about going into the VA and stoically asking to see the doctor. He's finally ready to talk to someone. But no one, at least on that day, was there to receive him.

The other side to his story is that he's in school and working really hard to make his life better. He's a rock star stud! He's not only testified before Congress for better VA treatment, ran marathons and competed in down hill skiing in Aspen on a mono-ski, he recently brought light to a potential solution for PTSD: **Hyperbaric Oxygen Therapy**. His highly effective personal skills convinced a producer for *CBS World News tonight with Katie Couric* to do a story on this treatment hoping to convince the VA that it's a therapy that has worked. Or at least it has for him. But like with any healing process, once is not enough. He is currently seeking other places that provide will this treatment.

We ended up having dinner at the Wing's house that night. The three of us drank red wine, sang really loudly and badly to The Doors, and danced around the kitchen. As I watched this young man take off his legs and get him self into the hot tub, my heart sank, broke and repaired itself all over again. He is not to be pitied by any means, but if anyone deserves a second chance, it's him. He's a true American Hero. He may not have ever anticipated that his life would be about charging his leg so it works, wheelchair ramps, or the idea that dancing now happens from the waist up, but that's where he is. And he is doing an amazing job, but he needs help to start his New Beginning.

This **Hyperbaric Oxygen treatment**, is from what I can tell, a very significant piece in this long, complicated, messy puzzle to helping him and the countless others who suffer from PTSD heal. Truly Heal. So what I would have said to that audience of women had I met Chad before I spoke, is that Second Chances and New Beginnings require compassion from friends and strangers, you can't do any of it alone. I can see his new beginning just around the corner, if he gets the help he needs and deserves. We need to help him see it too.

Note to Self: Give to the Veterans any way that you can.