



Memory of Dead Soldier Haunts One Female Vet

by Nicole Tropp and Caitlin Cruz | News21

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Former U.S. Army medic Kelly Schramm spent almost two years piecing together the mangled bodies of fellow soldiers in Iraq during her two tours, one at the Tallil Air Base near Nasiriyah and another in the Green Zone in Baghdad.

“Working in the military, you have to do whatever is necessary. You can’t wait for a nurse or a doctor to come and give the medications that need to be done or do the procedures that need to be done; if it had to be done, you have to do it,” she said.

Schramm, now 30, enlisted just before 9/11 when she was 18. She shipped out to boot camp just after Sept. 11 — “Oh, I was so freaked out.” But it’s the memory of one soldier that followed Schramm back to the states and stays with her now.

During her second deployment, a tank rolled over into a large puddle of mud trapping a soldier beneath the turret. Members of the soldier’s unit pulled him out from beneath the tank and he was airlifted to the medics in Baghdad.

“We got him back, we got a heartbeat, which was miraculous,” said Schramm. The soldier was declared brain-dead but placed on life-support so his body could be airlifted to the Army base in Landstuhl, Germany, where his family could say goodbye, she said.

“We were cleaning this guy up, and he was covered in mud. I mean he had mud in his ears, in his eyeballs, in his eye sockets and his nose,” said Schramm. “But for him, I was like, you know, I’m glad his family gets to see him because he just looked peaceful, like he was sleeping.”

Later, Schramm and her colleagues received a call that the airlift to Landstuhl wouldn’t happen.

“I was just so angry that they can fly the Dallas cheerleaders in, they can fly ... (former Secretary of State) Condoleezza Rice in,” Schramm said, “but they can’t fly this soldier out, that gave his life for this country, to see his family. And so, we had to pull the plug.”

When Schramm came home in 2006, she said the desire to start fresh pushed her forward, but the effects of serving in a war zone held her back. She almost immediately enrolled in a community college near the University of Florida in Gainesville to begin pursuing her bachelor’s degree.

“When I first got out, I really felt like I didn’t want to be around other veterans,” said Schramm, “because I felt like veterans are notorious for telling war stories and rehashing, you know? I was like, I want to move forward, I don’t want to sit around and live in the past.”

Then one day, she said, she just didn’t leave her house. And she didn’t leave it the next day, or the next, or the two months after that. She failed every course.

“I was just surviving with the PTSD,” said Schramm. “I was going to counseling, but I would say I was in survival mode, I wasn’t really dealing with it.”

After attending a retreat for combat veterans offered by the nonprofit organization Merritt Center in Payson, Ariz., that provided mentoring services and therapeutic exercises, Schramm said she decided to move to Arizona and transferred to Arizona State University.

For a brief time, she lived with a fellow veteran she met at the retreat. When that didn’t work out, she wound up nearly homeless, moving from house to house.

“I found myself without a place to live, with a moving truck full of crap,” Schramm said.

A friend told Schramm about Mary Ellen’s Place, a home that provides affordable housing for women veterans in north Phoenix.

She expected to stay a couple of months: She’s been living there since July 2012, and now expects to stay until she finishes her biotechnology degree at ASU in December 2014. Afterward, she hopes to enroll in medical school.

“What I’ve learned from being here, that being around other veterans, specifically other veterans that are trying to move forward ... there’s an understanding, you don’t have to explain why you’re feeling what you’re feeling, or why you’re doing what you’re doing, they just understand.”

Her post-traumatic stress generally affects her by causing depression and self-imposed isolation. But, she said, “Being here with other people who are going through the same thing, it’s easier when I get into those modes of isolation to break out of my shell and be around other people.”

Mary Ellen’s Place has provided Schramm with the stability needed to address her biggest priorities — medical school acceptance and continued counseling for her PTSD.

“When I move out of here, I’ll move past all of that.”

Caitlin Cruz was a Women & Philanthropy Fellow for News21 this summer.



GALLERY

Caitlin Cruz/News21

Former U.S. Army medic Kelly Schramm, 30, stands in the entryway of Mary Ellen’s Place in north Phoenix, where she and other returning female veterans have found affordable housing.



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