

November 16, 2018

Operation Heroes and Heroines

Mr. Jerry Paulsen, President

Hello,

My name is Michael Vargo. I am an Army veteran and a soldier. I spent a little over 8 years of my life in the Army. I was just a kid when I joined in 1996. I came from a very poor background, like so many others that find themselves wearing the uniform. A way out of poverty, a way out from the streets so riddled with gang violence, drugs, and the underworld as so many like to call it.

I only knew from a young age that I would be a soldier like my grandfather, whom served as a medic during the forgotten war. I knew that I wanted to be a man under not just his eyes, but also the eyes of a father who had abandoned me from birth, but I digress.

My life for the past 2 years has been the hardest they have ever been. Already dealing with survivors' guilt and the self-degradation my 6 year old child was struck with tragedy. she wasn't touched with cancer, she wasn't struck with any possibility of hope. she was dead in the eyes of everyone around. she had been mauled by 2 fully grown rottweilers for 27 minutes. well past a lifetime for someone so young. devastating I know. Heart wrenching as well as skin crawling to know what 2 dogs, trained to do such things could truly do to flesh. what's worse to this child is watching and knowing that one of 2 people that were always supposed to protect them, stood by and did nothing. that this person that you thought you could count on the most was the last to help.

Now as a father that made a choice to leave the marriage after 17 years, I had to face the reality that my daughter, my baby, one of only 3 reasons I exist in this world, is now facing death and in fact has died already on the way to the hospital from the loss of so much blood as well as the pure shock. All I knew on my way to driving to the hospital, which seemed a lifetime, was that her mother and her mother's boyfriend was the cause. with that in mind and being the programmed killing machine that I was so sufficiently trained to be, the first thing I was going to do was to kill the 2 people responsible for the death of my daughter.

The moment I arrived at the hospital, I realized that security was tight. Luckily, I had noticed that coats weren't being inspected and that all I had to do is slip my knife into the hole in the liner of my jacket. And that's exactly what I did. I slipped passed the unsuspecting security and began to fish for my pig sticker while getting closer and closer to where I thought I'd be meeting my ex and her boyfriend. Finally, I fetched my blade and as I drew closer Out of nowhere my other 2 children that had witnessed the entire horrific nightmare, grabbed me from behind. At that moment I dropped my blade back into the abyss of the hole in my coat and woke to the cries of my sorely hurt children.

I then saw firsthand the devastation as the doctor walked me back to the ER room where my precious Nadiah was laid. there she was lifeless, covered in blood, covered in leaves, and covered in mud. The

counselors on hand as well as the priest, the nurse that had taken the case first responded with, "we don't know what will happen next, but prepare yourself because the chance of survival was slipping dramatically." All the while my ex apologizing and crying. Spouting her truths. I couldn't see anything but pain as one of 3 lights in my life was about to be diminished, but for that moment I put myself in her mothers shoes and couldn't imagine what she must be going through.

Fast forward several days of sitting in a room with my ex and her new boyfriend, trying to be supportive and understanding to their grief as well as my own, I find out from the police officer investigating the attack that nothing my ex and her new guy had claimed to be true. I found out the truth. I saw the evidence, the past statements, the past convictions and realized that what had happened was that my ex and her boyfriend had in fact done the equivalent of putting a loaded M60 machine gun on the living room floor and let the kids play with it. You see the dogs were trained to attack anything they came across until death had struck their victim, or until they had their fill of flesh.

According to the children it was because it was a free place to live. According to my ex it was because she couldn't afford anything on her own. but according to fact, she was just handed an 8k check from the sale of our family home before moving in with this man and his dogs. She had only just met this man on an online dating site we all know as tinder just a month prior. SHES ONLY KNOWN THIS MAN FOR A MONTH BEFORE MOVING MY CHILDREN IN? According to her own account the dogs had been violent toward her and the children in the past, yet by her own admission she never once stressed her concern for our children's safety with the man whom controlled the dogs. NOT ONCE did this come into factor by her own admission.

After 3 days in ICU Nadiah had been transferred to the burn unit because they were the only ones qualified to handle such devastation. I cannot leave this precious angle alone not even for a minute, and so I stayed right by her side every moment, every horribly painful bandage change, which was the only time she had been awake, if that's what you would like to call it.

After knowing the truth, and tired of hearing the lies, but most important being there holding my babies hand as the doctors shoved gauze in places there were no longer flesh and in holes so deep they almost went through her legs, listening to the horrific screams. The screams that surpassed the screams already haunting my dreams from past, I could not with good reason allow the 2 people responsible access to my babies any longer.

I have a brother that would do anything I ask without question, which is always great to have, picked up my gun and brought it to me during hours security was very lax. He with me gun also in toe waited for my ex and her boyfriend to show as she had promised she would do not heading my warning. My brother could not wait any longer but assured me of an escape route when needed. I found myself alone getting angrier and angrier. My ex never showed, and God stepped in with a Jehovah witness. (Great story and I'll gladly tell anyone that asks).

Fast forward, I receive custody of my daughter but not the other 2, mainly because we as a society have a seriously messed up ideal that a mother is more the nurturer, than the father. She struggles while we work hard on rehabilitation. stuck in a wheelchair, Nadiah needed help with everything. I still had to

physically bath her then shove gauze into her legs daily so that what was left of her muscle tissue would grow properly. This lasted for over a month after being out of the hospital. We worked hard on recovery and perseverance. To adapt and overcome as we had been taught so well while in service.

Every day of hearing the screams for over 2 months grew on me. the weight of allowing these 2 people to continue to breath I thought was cowardess. I couldn't forgive myself, and worse I couldn't see my children forgiving me either. I felt just my allowing these 2 to continue to live their lives was the sickest thing I could do to my children, yet every time I would make the opportunity to end their lives God would intervene. I became angry with God.

Fast forward to what brought me to Horses and Heros. A good brother made me go. Literally. He gave me no choice and was excepting 0 excuses. He had a plan for any excuse that I may had come up with.

Not knowing what this was or what is was about I went. I remember thinking, I will keep an open mind, only because it meant so much to my brother that I go. Everything fell into place and I was on my way, with my father who was also a vet, to be honest I just didn't want to walk into something unknown without having someone watching my 6.

I cannot describe the overwhelming, and indescribable feeling of safety, I can only describe as comfort I felt the moment we arrived. My father and I were met with something we vets don't feel much in real life, vulnerability without consequence.

We were surrounded by those whom not only understood, but actually listened. all there for our own needs, everyone from generation to generation felt secure. we are taught from what I call birth, that vulnerability is a negative and to show it means pain or death. We didn't feel this way. It was truly difficult to let go and let loose the demons within to be exorcised, but the environment created by the volunteers of this organization not once made you feel as though you needed the wall we have all created.

I had no idea how therapy and horses were connected. I thought, this was just simply another ridiculous out of touch program. That changed when I realized that the horses I found myself around, were just like me. Abused, frustrated, lost, angry, etc..... But what really hit close to home is when I met Klair. She was covered in wounds. She still was learning to walk again. Much as I watched my Nadiyah struggle I was watching it all over again with a horse. Maybe it was just simply deep thinking that made the connection, but it felt more spiritual than coincidence.

Every day, my heart slowly changed. Watching the trust, the love, and the intuition these beautiful animals had even after being mistreated, abandoned, attacked etc..... was enough to realize the damage my anger that had consumed my life both at myself as well as others wasn't the answer.

The tools that Doc G and Jenny provided me with as well as their own personal stories convinced me that I had been wasting my energy on hate. On evil. On vengeance. I realized that I needed to be the father these kids deserved and continue to be a parent that could inspire other parents. I realized that with these new-found tools I could be something positive in lives around me and not an evil that

plagues.

I cannot thank the staff enough, for changing my life, but also my children's future. I do love you all. And to those of you doubting yourselves or doubting the effect this program may have on your life, just like the military we once gave our lives to, you get out of it , what you put into it. come with an open mind and walls at half-mast. I assure you won't be disappointed.

With love and respect,

Michael Vargo

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1996-2003