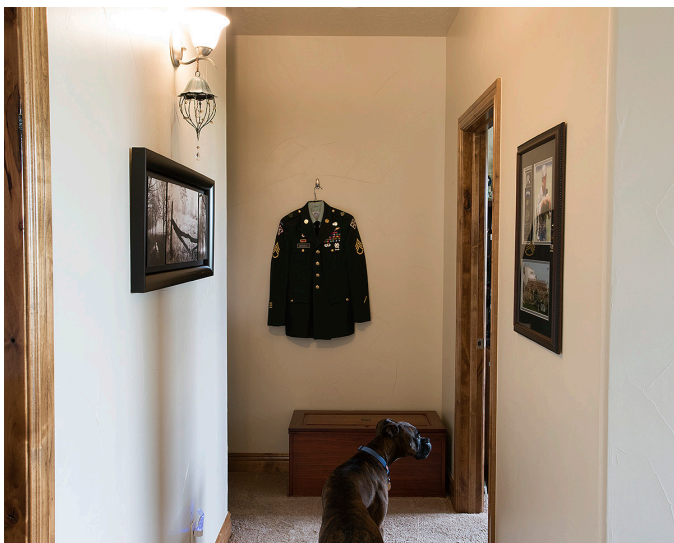


What's Left Behind



INBAL ABERGIL



What's Left Behind by Inbal Abergil

PROJECT STATEMENT

What's Left Behind examines the ways in which American families memorialize their relatives killed in military conflict. Inbal Abergil traveled throughout the U.S. to meet with relatives of fallen soldiers and military personnel and to document their methods of coping with loss through the preservation of personal effects.

Small, private monuments exist in garages, basements, attics and storage lockers across the United States. Families must decide which objects to keep, what to take with them or let go of when they move or as time passes. Through images and testimonials, Abergil's project honors the dead while at the same time giving voice to a community of survivors who keep memory alive as they strive to rebuild their lives in the aftermath of loss.

ABOUT THE PHOTOGRAPHER

Inbal Abergil is a New York-based conceptual documentary artist and educator originally from Jerusalem. Her practice focuses on the aftermath of war and the human cost of conflict.

She is the recipient of the Pollock-Krasner Grant (2018), and a finalist for the 2018 Documentary Essay Prize in Photography at Duke University. Her series *Nothing Left Here but The Hurt* has been nominated for the prestigious Prix Pictet Photography Prize (2012). Her work has been exhibited internationally in museum and gallery exhibitions, with solo shows in New York and Tel-Aviv.

Abergil has also shown at the Center for Contemporary Art in Northern Ireland, the Meneer de Wit Gallery, Amsterdam, the Museum of Photography, Tel-Hay, Israel, the Museum of Israeli Art, the Jeonju Photo Festival, South Korea, Shulamit Gallery Venice, California, The Nathan Cummings Foundation, NYC, and Aperture Gallery, NYC. Most recently her work is included in *In the Presence of Absence* The Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts, NYC.

Abergil's work is in the permanent collections of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, MFAH The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Israel Museum, Fisher Landau Center for Art, Haaretz and The American University Art Museum. Her first monograph, *N.O.K-Next of Kin*, came out with Daylight Publishing.

Abergil received her M.F.A. in Visual Arts from Columbia University, and her B.F.A. with honors from the Midrasha School of Art, Israel. In addition to her studio practice, Abergil is an Associate Professor of Photography at Pace University in New York City.



LT. COL. MCCARTY



CHAPLAIN (MAJOR) SMITH

CURATORIAL NOTE

Grief has strange physics. You lose something and gain what feels like more weight than you can bear. In her project, *What's Left Behind*, Inbal Abergil follows the thread of grief as it winds its way through the families of departed soldiers.

Reading several stories at once makes it apparent that while some experiences have similarities, every loss is unique. Bereavement is a journey that is at once amorphous, boundaryless, and yet strangely concrete. For example, how does one sort through the physical objects that a person has left behind? What do they mean? An object that seems of little value in the eyes of a stranger can become a lifeline to a grieving parent or spouse.

There is a knock on the door that military families hope to never receive. Notifiers arrive in pairs; one chaplain and one officer are tasked with bearing the most difficult news. Abergil has included their perspective, with large unflinching portraits that are interspersed between the family stories. Their bodies are poised in formal dress uniforms, but sorrow reflects back from their eyes. The images ask us to confront the faces that no parent wants to see. In the gallery, these portraits are larger than life size, as inescapable as the news they bear.

The interviews below provide a more in-depth account of each family's story and offer the reader a chance to bear witness to these losses.

A conversation with...

CHRISTINA BIXBY



Wife of **CHAPLAIN (CPT) DALE ALLEN GOETZ**

Army chaplain. Killed in action August 30, 2010, Afghanistan



We ended up having it on my 40th birthday because we had to. I thought, it's my birthday, but I'll celebrate him, his life. I buried him on my 40th birthday.

He has boots upstairs, which still have the mud. I'm not getting rid of the mud. They still have the mud from Afghanistan; he was known as the dirty-boots chaplain because he went where they were.

I couldn't explain it, I just had this feeling, I drove up into my driveway and it was just this kind of slow-motion weird feeling... I stood in the middle of my living room, and that thought crossed my mind, what if? I lifted up my blinds, I looked out my window, and they were still there. And I turn around and I say, "Dear God, what if?" Then I went to my computer, eager to find an email from him and I got on Yahoo and the first thing I saw was "five killed

in Kandahar." It just screamed at me. I thought, maybe he's just hurt. Nobody had called me yet, nobody knocked at my door yet; I just had this feeling. I stood in the middle of that same spot in my living room and then King Kong knocked on my door. I stood there and went, what do I do? I open the door and there was the blue uniform, the chaplain, in his dress blues and the enlisted in his greens. I didn't know who these men were except that it wasn't a good thing.

I looked at them, and of course they were struggling because they didn't want to tell me this. They had a protocol to follow, and the first thing I said was, "Is he gone?" They couldn't say a whole lot of things, and I buried my head in that chaplain's suit and I just bawled. I said, "The Lord gives and the Lord takes away, blessed be the name of the Lord." I loved that man; he was a blessing, a gift, and I just was like, that's it, I'm done on this earth.

I kept thinking, how am I going to tell my boys? And so, three o'clock came and they got off school, and the first one to come in was Landon. He looked at me and he looked at all these people and he said it, "Was daddy killed?" I didn't say anything. I was sitting in my little rocker with these people around, and then he could see in my eyes that I've been crying. About 30 seconds later, Caleb, who's happy-go-lucky, comes running up the stairs and he's like, "What's going on?" He goes, "Was daddy killed?" And he said the same thing. I called them over to my chair and I had them sit on my lap. I just held them and I said, "Guys, where is the best place to be?" And they said, "Home," and I said, "Where's home?" I said, "Where really is home?" And they said, "Heaven." And I said, "That's where Daddy is." And they just cried and cried and I held them and then it was like, in their little minds, what do you do? How do you react? And they got up and just ran out and did whatever. I had to deal with reality again and all these people and all the planning. That's how they were notified.

I'm told this was in the vehicle with him. It smelled like smoke. I don't know how it could have survived. This is the one that's hardest. This is my most prized of all of his stuff. The fact that it came off like this, that's his wedding ring. I don't know. It didn't quite look like that. The heat was so intense that it changed. But, anyway, I'm thankful that the soldier took it, because that's my most precious gift that I got back.

A conversation with...

PAM BIRDWELL



Mother of **SSG CHRISTOPHER J. BIRDWELL**

Killed in action August 27, 2012, Afghanistan.



We can be buried with Chris. If he was married, then it would be available for his spouse. We had to determine how deep they were to dig it and then how many places to leave open to be buried with him. Just something you don't think about your own death at that time. Although you would trade yours for his so that he could live a little bit longer and experience things that you've experienced, and he would have made a great dad.

Are you familiar with the book *The Giving Tree*, by Shel Silverstein? When he was a baby and very early on, he would lie on his back, we'd lie on our bed, and I would just hold the book up because they see so well in black-and-white, and so he would just kick and get so excited about that book, and that book just seems to correlate with his life.

Well, I wonder if by reading that—We did that so often, almost every day, and I just wonder if it just stuck with him because it's like the ultimate—you just give everything of yourself. He was very much a boy. Very active and adventurous. He was always a thrill seeker.

This is Chris's favorite ornament. Every year he'd come and say, "where's my ornament?" And it just cracked him up. I was out one day and we found this ornament of a little boy on skis and he's hit a tree, and that's exactly how Chris broke his leg. He was going so fast—he leaned over and his leg was out and that's what went into the tree and just snapped his bone...And ever since I started decorating this tree, I just haven't taken it down. It's not in our way, and I like having it up to honor Chris, and it just makes me smile when I see it.

That's his uniform. Our casualty assistance officer had it cleaned for us and I just didn't want to put it away and hang it in a closet. I wanted just to keep it out. Apparently it looks funny on a hanger on a hook.

I was standing when they told us. It was just—it was a shock, you just—you hear it but you don't really—I mean, I didn't cry; I know that I probably was thinking—probably expecting to cry but it didn't feel real, I couldn't believe this was happening, so I didn't cry.

I tried to reach out to the soldier that was at the back of the vehicle, but I don't think he was in a good place, and I don't think it was a good time for him to share with us or remember because I asked him if Chris had saved his life... He can't remember, he doesn't—sort of part of that it's too hard or they're just not ready.

When I was there last Sunday, there was a lady there who goes there every Sunday to put flowers on her father's grave. I think if I were closer, I'd probably be there a lot more often, but since we're not, then probably just as well because work keeps us busy. It's so peaceful, you know—you can go and take a blanket or a chair and just sit there or read or whatever. Sing, nobody will know if you sing off-tune.

A conversation with...

SCOTI DOMEIJ



Mother of **SGT FIRST CLASS KRISTOFFER DOMEIJ**

Army Ranger. Killed in action October 22, 2011, Afghanistan



In my bedroom... some stars are up on the ceiling that he put up there, in grade seven. I look at them every night. Because I know they have his DNA.

When he was 17, he called me and he wanted me to let him join the army. I said, “No, I won’t do that.” And then I said, “I would prefer that you go to college.” So he says, “I’m tired of people telling me what to do, I’m tired of people telling me to do my homework and clean my room.” And in my mind, I’m thinking, “And you want to join the army?” The boy is in for a rude awakening. But mainly he said, he just wanted to jump off airplanes and blow up things; he wanted to be an Army Ranger.

After his first deployment, Kristoffer said, “I never expected to go to war,” and I’m thinking, “That’s why I didn’t want you to join—my whole life, we’ve been at war. How did you miss this, son?” He called me when he was 17; he wanted to join. I said, “Don’t. Here’s my preference,” but I said, “If at 18 you choose to join,

I will support you three thousand percent.” But what I didn’t tell him is, in my heart, my heart would not support that. But he was an adult and he could make that decision.

Well, we’d always talk before and after a deployment. Sometimes he called during a deployment. But when he got married, he called his wife, he didn’t call Mom, which is fine. So he would call me maybe a few times during the deployment. And now, realizing what they did and how busy they were, I think it was a miracle I got any phone calls at all.

So I thought, don’t tell me where my son is, I will find him. I spent three days on the Internet, went to Afghani and Pakistani sites that were in English. I would just follow links. After three days I emailed him, and I say, “Well, I think you are at this base, I think you are fighting in these mountains.” His commander was furious. “How did your mother know this?” He says, “My mother is smart.” I would ask questions and I’d figure out things. So the next time I asked him, “So how’s the weather?” “I can’t tell you that.” It was national security. All I wanted to know was what country he was in.

I just can’t remember at the moment because my brain doesn’t remember things since Kristoffer was killed. I have a hard time recalling details. I think he was deployed in August and then he was killed October 22. So, here’s the bizarre thing, I’m informed on October 21 that my son was killed on October 22. Because it’s October 22 in Afghanistan. I didn’t know what my son’s date was—it’s so bizarre to be informed of your son’s death date the day before.

It was a media explosion because Kristoffer was killed on his 14th deployment; he is the most deployed soldier in American history to be killed in action.

You don’t want to believe it. You know it’s a reality. I could feel my brain rejecting it. And so basically, even if you’re not thinking about your child’s death, your brain is processing this trauma and it pushes out everything it doesn’t need. Which just so happens to be your memory. And so that was one of the first questions I asked Gold Star moms: “When do I get my brain back?” They said, “Oh, four or five years.”

But I have noticed the difference. Last month, I started feeling like I’m falling apart; I felt fragile and what’s going on? Your body knows, October is coming, his birthday, his death date. And so even if you’re not thinking about it, your body doesn’t let you forget.

A conversation with...

TRACY DICE-JOHNSON



Wife of **SGT DONNA R. JOHNSON**

514th Military Police Company. Killed in action October 1, 2012, Afghanistan



These are memorial tattoos for her. I did it after she left...

I didn't want a relationship because I was getting ready to deploy that November. She was one of those people that I couldn't forget. Once we got together, we just never really looked back.

I'm National Guard now, and I'm still an EOD—explosive ordnance disposal, which is basically army bomb squad. I was stationed here and I met her on St. Patrick's Day and uh, we hit it off.

She went ahead and deployed, so—we're both in Iraq the first time. Then because I got extended, I could get an extra vacation. So instead of going to Qatar I would choose to go to her. I went and stayed a week with her. We're not allowed to be a couple yet in the military, cause "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" was still in effect, so we still had to hide our relationships. Pretty much everybody knew, but that's the thing that "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," if nobody asks you any questions, you don't have to tell anything.

I got this house because I knew we needed a place to heal. When I came back, I was messed up and I wanted nothing to do with anybody, especially my family or her family. I wanted nobody around, and I knew that she needed a quiet place more so than I did. So, I basically got this house for us to heal.

It was 2010; I proposed, but under "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," if you're caught in a marriage, pretty much, you are automatically kicked out of the army. Neither one of us wanted to lose our careers—I mean, you serve because it's part of your heart, you serve because it's who you are and you want to do something for your community or for your brothers and sisters, so we didn't want to lose that.

So, fast-forward to September of 2011, when "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" was repealed, and we're gonna try to get married on our anniversary of October 10. Then we found out she was up for deployment again for Afghanistan, and if we don't make this happen, it's not gonna happen. We got married in 2012. We were not allowed to get married here in North Carolina. So we went to Washington, D.C.... So it was really like a 24-hour elopement. We just ran up there and done it. "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" had been repealed, but none of the laws had really changed.

I woke up because she hadn't called. She was supposed to call. I was like, something's not right. So I got on the Internet, and the first page I went to, in red letters, it was like, three US casualties, Khowst, Afghanistan. So I knew that was her unit, and I knew it potentially was her.

I just knew she wasn't coming back from this deployment. It was just one of those things. Because I've been deployed, I know that the first thing that happens is they do a media blackout, communications blackout. They cut off the phones. They cut off the Internet. They cut off everything but necessary military traffic, so they have time to notify family members, so it's not found out over social media or inappropriate means. I started calling around, and I found out that they had been hit.

I called her mom. I was like, "Look, something's wrong with Donna's unit. I don't know what yet." I'm like, "But if anybody calls, you need to answer the phone." I called her sister, told her to be aware. Make sure that somebody was at the house in case somebody came to the house. I knew they weren't going to come here because I knew they weren't going to be allowed to come here. I knew that the military still didn't recognize me as her spouse, even though we were legally married. I tried to just sleep the day away because I didn't

want to face it anymore. Her sister called me about an hour later, and told me that the people with uniforms are here and told her that Donna had been killed.

I asked her to have them wait there for me. So, I called a friend of mine and had her come get me cause I wasn't in shape to drive. And I grabbed our marriage certificate and went over there, and I told him, "Hey, I'm her wife." I had to go to track them down and force them to give me a notification. They should have respected me enough to notify me. I was not recognized as her spouse whatsoever. I was not recognized as anything to her.

Fortunately, the only reason I was given any information is because her mom passed the information on to me. If it wasn't for her mom treating me as her spouse, then I would've been shut out completely. She allowed me to have a vote on the type of casket, where she needed to be buried; she allowed me to have a voice. Now Donna, rightfully, made her mom the person in charge of disposition of her remains—it is called the "PAD." Which is fine. But it's still not the same as next of kin; I should have been considered her next of kin.

So at the time, her will was in Afghanistan with her; that's all kind of important because without her will, I wouldn't have been able to keep our house. Fortunately, we were able to get the will. Going back to bringing her home, fortunately her mom allowed—and I say allowed, I mean, I hope you understand the impact of what I mean by allowed, I mean, 'cause she didn't have to. I would not even have been at my own wife's funeral. She allowed me to go to the funeral. She allowed me at least some dignity to the situation.

Part of the heartache was, like even her wedding ring—she did not have her wedding ring on, that she was wearing when she was killed, and this is a necklace I keep it on me at all times. I'd bought her this when she graduated law enforcement. It is St. Michael, the patron saint of protectors. These were supposed to be given to her mom because I wasn't considered her next of kin, and it really hurt that I had to give her our wedding ring. I do what I was supposed to do; I turned everything over to her mom, and then her mom turned around and gave it to me. Her mom was such a good person; she is the only reason I probably have any sanity right now.

Her mom allowed it to be put in her obituary that she was survived by her spouse, Tracy. Obviously I wasn't recognized as her spouse, so I wasn't given widow's compensation, I wasn't recognized by the veterans' affairs. Spouses of fallen military members are given what is called DIC. It's Dependent Identity Compensation—DIC income—and I didn't qualify for that because they didn't recognize me as her spouse, so that was a legal fight, and I took that to the news.

I went public with the situation. Honestly, it wasn't necessarily to take care of me, because I am still healthy enough to take care of myself, but I just didn't want it to happen to someone else. Once the legal definition was changed, they can recognize me as her spouse, and finally I was able to get DIC, but more importantly, it was for everybody else.

We lived that last year—I know the saying goes, like, "Live like you are dying"—we did so much that last year. We were constantly on the go, we were constantly on the bikes, we were constantly at the beach. She was just, like, she was trying to get us as much life in before she knew she was leaving. Kind of made sense. We were the first same-sex couple, who, being legally allowed to be married, had a casualty of war, that could've, should have, been recognized but wasn't.

I'm still in the National Guard, yeah. What really makes it hard, because I do love my country, I really, really do, but there are times it feels like it doesn't love me back, because I only ask them for what I think fair. I'm not asking for anything above and beyond. I'm just asking for the right thing to be done.



A conversation with...

EMILY TORO



Mother of **PV2 ISAAC T. CORTES**

Killed in action November 27, 2007, Iraq



I remember right before he was going to get deployed, I had this horrible dream. And in the dream he was killed. I saw it. I saw he was in the Humvee...This was, I think, maybe, I don't know, a couple of weeks maybe, or maybe less than that, I can't remember. I used to remember things, but losing Isaac is like... But from that day that I had the dream, I was preparing myself for what was to come because something told me he was going to die. He was not going to come back home. And he would call me every weekend. He was only in Iraq eight weeks. That's it, eight weeks.

I understand that it's costly, but I don't want him as cargo. I want him back in a plane with someone that's going to escort him. When they brought him back, he was brought back in a private plane.

I saw him, because I said [to my son], "Chris, I need to see him, I'm not going to spend the rest of my life thinking what he looked like." Because I was touching him. He seemed OK. Chris puts his hands on the knee to feel his leg because he was afraid. He says, "I just want to make sure that he's all there." He was touching, he says, "OK, his legs are there, everything is there." And that was it.

Everything is in there (storage) —the only time I go there is when I need something. If I can't find it, I leave. It's just that when I go there I cry. It took me a year before I put up anything of Isaac. And then when I lost my apartment it hurt, because it's like I put him back in a box and back in storage, never to see him again. When I go to the storage, I get overwhelmed because I look at the stuff and I'm like, "Oh God." Or I see a box that says "Isaac's stuff"; I have a lot of "Isaac's stuff" boxes. Even the little things.

See, my ex-husband, for him, Isaac is dead, let him be. And I can't. I have to remember Isaac. I keep the memory alive. Before he died, he said to me, "Mommy, I'm going to be famous. Everybody's going to know me." "Isaac, please, you're so cocky." He said, "You watch." Then you think about it now. He said it then. But him dying, look what I have done. His name is on a post office. He has his street. His name is on a race car. His name is in Chicago. His name is in a wall in California. His name is in the Rayburn Building of Washington, D.C. So, technically, he's everywhere. And the patches that I made for him, people saw them on the Internet. And they order my patches, so he's everywhere. So, not only in Chicago, D.C., North Carolina—I mean, he's everywhere. So, there's a part of Isaac somewhere all over the United States. Yes, thinking then and now, it's like, OK, this is what he meant.

This is his pillow, this one here, see. These are his shirts, so this is his little pillow. It's his two shirts. This is his army shirt and this is his other shirt. I always keep it like this, and that's it. Yes, these are what I got back. The two shirts and the pillow came back, so I kept this. And that's how I sleep with them; I pretend that it's him. It's not him, but I pretend.

A conversation with...

CYNTHIA AND RANDALL (RANDY) WHITING



Stepmother and Father of **SSG JUSTIN R. WHITING**

Special Forces medical sergeant. Killed in action
January 19, 2008, Iraq



Before they get deployed, they have, like, a sheet of paper they fill out; it's almost like a last request or a will in a sense—where do you want to be buried, what kind of service you want? So, you had a little guideline of what they would like you to do. Justin didn't want any sad songs.

He wasn't shy about telling anybody exactly how he felt. In both ways. If you do good, he would be the first one to come over and shake your hand.

He joked about when he went to basic training, 'cause he worked so hard at the farm, he said, "This is easier than being on the farm." "This is easy, and they're feeding me three times a day."

He fell backwards over the wagon, broke his femur. He looked like he had two. He never cried, and he was five years old. He said, "Well, Dad, it looks like I broke my leg."

It was gonna be Nathan's first deployment. Justin already had two. So, we pulled up out here, and there's a van across the street, parked. When I drive by, I was in the passenger seat, and I looked and I see there was a chaplain. And you know right away. We didn't know which child. Could've been any of 'em, Really. When we got out of the vehicle, he said, "Mr. Whiting." And probably three quarters expected it to be Nathan. It was his first tour and... maybe did something stupid. So when they told us it was Justin, it really, really floored us. We just couldn't picture that happening. "N— not Justin. No. He's too savvy. He wouldn't let that happen."

Six weeks later, we got a call from the assistant officer at West Point. He wanted to come see us. So he comes up and he tells us, "We have more remains." And he didn't have any details on how, or why we have more remains, but we have more remains. And I don't know if they ever did tell us; maybe when they dismantled the Humvee that he was in, they found pieces. We don't really have the details; we didn't really ask. We may not want to hear the answer, but... when we found out about this, it was really raw. It was like pulling a scab off a wound or something. It was really hard. For the second notification, we had him cremated, and we just did a small service.

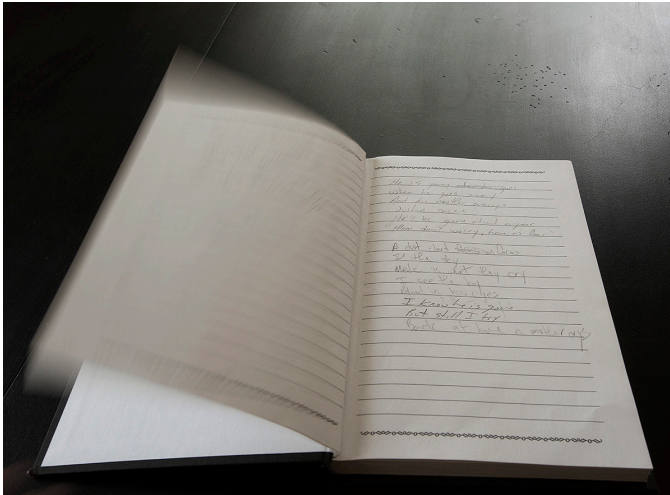
I don't know that we were ready for too many details. As a matter of fact, we had to put a request for the accident report and... when it came, it sat on our coffee table for months, and then I moved it. I think we are getting closer, don't you? We've talked about it more openly lately than we have.

Here's his football jersey. They actually retired his number over at the high school. That was nice. This was his hat; he wore this hat everywhere. It's all beat up, hole in the leather; he had that always on his head.

They asked if there was anything they could do for us, so we asked Randy's mother, and she said she'd like to have a lock of his hair. I guess it's an old tradition that's kind of gone by, because they had said that they hadn't heard anybody ask for that. Nobody does it anymore. We made a frame. We put his picture in it and then a lock of his hair on the other side. My grandmother was the redhead, and that's where the red hair came from.

A conversation with...

ESTELLINE MILLER



Mother of **SSG JUSTIN R. WHITING**

Special Forces medical sergeant. Killed in action
January 19, 2008, Iraq



At the time when they all went in, it was a little unusual to have all the kids in the army. But as the war went on, it became not that unusual to have multiple kids. Amanda always knew growing up she wanted to be a soldier—that was just what she wanted to do. Justin said he couldn't very well have a sister in the army and not him; that would not be very good. He had always wanted to go in, too. Nathan graduated in 2001 and wasn't quite sure what he was going to do with his life. And then 9/11 happened and he basically said, "I can't have my brother and sister in and not me." That's why he went in. A lot of people say they give their kids luggage for high school graduation. I gave mine an army recruiter.

Justin was a Green Beret. Special Forces. They do a lot of things that we may not necessarily know about or want to know about. He deployed twice with his team. Special Forces are made up of 12-man teams, and he was the medic on his

team. When he knew that he was going to deploy, he kind of withdrew himself because he had to get in the mind-set of what he was going to be doing and had to focus on the mission. He might call a couple of weeks before they left, and then that would be it. I wouldn't hear from him until he got back.

The weekend before they deployed, this last time, when Justin died, Amanda and I had gone to Fort Campbell to be with them the weekend before they left. It was like my kids being little again. They would fuss and they laughed and joked. I've never laughed so hard just because they're such funny people, and they have such a unique sense of humor. Justin played the guitar. They were just brother and sister fooling around. But it was quite a memory, just to sit there that night and listen to them. But it's like God gives you those special moments to have. I do think he probably had some sense that something was going to happen. When we left that weekend and as we pulled out of his driveway, he was standing outside to wave goodbye. I said to Amanda, "Stop, let me hug him one more time." I ran up his driveway and he's laughing. I said to him, "Be careful." I said, "You take care of Nathan." And I said the same thing to Nathan, "Nathan, take care of Justin." But he just looked at me with these serious blue eyes, and he said, "Mom, it will be all right." I thought, "What does that mean? Why did he say that?" I remember getting in the car with Amanda saying, "He said it will be all right." No, not like, I will be all right or we'll be all right, don't worry. But it will be all right.

Nathan and Justin were deployed together when he died. They had never deployed together. That was the first time. Justin's team was just north of Mosul, and Nathan and his team were just south of Mosul, that area of Iraq. But that morning, the morning that Justin died, the two teams had come together for some reason, I don't know exactly why that happened. But Justin and Nathan sat that morning. And Nathan says he sat and laughed and joked. Nathan said they talked about who was the last one to talk to Mom or Dad. Nathan says that Justin got up to leave and he said, "Mom, I was able to look in his eyes." And they shook hands, and Nathan or Justin—do you do that with your kids, call them all the same name?

And within a half hour of leaving Nathan that morning, he was killed.

I came back in the house, and my doorbell rang. I opened it and I knew. I could tell that one was a chaplain. I saw his cross on his uniform, and the other man had such a baby face. He looked so young. The young man said, "Are you Estelline Miller?" And I guess I just looked at him, because he asked me again. I think I was thinking that if I didn't let them in, then they couldn't tell me. But the chaplain said to me, "Ms. Miller, you need to let us in." They

came in, and I remember thinking, “This can’t be happening because they’ve always told me—” my kids have always said, and Amanda has deployed, “We will be fine. Don’t worry.” I had just chosen to live a very naive life. They said nothing would happen, and that’s what I chose to believe. Of course I worried about them, but I never once let myself think something would happen. They came in here and they kept saying to me, “Ms. Miller, we need you to sit down.” I kept screaming at them, “Which one of my boys is dead?” I finally sat down, and I’m still never sure why—how that seems to help anyone. Why do I need to sit down? But he stood over me, trying to read this piece of paper, and his hands were shaking. You can see the paper shaking in his hands. That’s when he said Justin’s name.

Nathan said, “The moment after the captain told me, the first thing I thought of was, I have to bring him home.” I think that was just so overwhelming for him, just that responsibility of bringing your brother home.

Hancock, New York. All the family members are buried there. It’s just a small county cemetery with a little white church, and my kids went to Sunday school there. That’s where he’s buried.



He wasn’t someone that took a lot of things with him because he had to carry it wherever he went. I know he didn’t have a lot. It was mostly his clothing. For whatever reason, he had a watch that I had given him several years before for Christmas. And why he had that in Iraq I have no idea. I had given him a kind of a hardbound notebook. I think the date in it is 2002 because he liked to write things down. And he had that with him. Why did he have that? I don’t know. Justin never wanted me to send him anything because it was too much to carry with him because they weren’t stationary. He said, “Everything you send me, I have to put somewhere on me,” on his body. He said, “Don’t send me anything unless I can eat it.”

In some respects, the anniversary of his death is just the marking of time for me. His birthday is, I guess, where I sense the most loss. The most what would have been, what could have been.

I think I’ve kind of figured out why I needed to know all the details of how he died. I wanted to know, why were they on that road? Why was he the driver, because typically he wouldn’t be the driver. I wanted to know how big was the explosion. Give me the dimensions. I wanted to know what the Humvee looked like after the explosion. I wanted to know exactly the time that it took from the time the explosion happened to the time they got there, the team got to him. I wanted to know, what was he doing in the truck, was he—or in the Humvee? Were they just driving? Was he talking? Was he singing? Because he was always singing. I needed a picture of what his last moments were like. I needed, I guess, to kind of put the finality on what was he doing when he died. Does that make sense?

Did I tell you he had gotten out of the army? He had kind of had enough of the politics and what was going on over there. He said, “I’m going to get out. I’m going to hunt and fish until the money runs out.” He was only out for just a few months, and his team told him that they were headed back to Iraq. He basically said, “I don’t want them to go without me.”

I think this is what means the most to me. It comes from someone in Justin’s command. He says, “It was my decision to place Justin’s Special Forces operational detachment to the forward operating base at—” ... I just thought, what an honorable man that he felt the need to say, “It was my decision.” I thought, he must feel awful. And I don’t know what that must be like for him.

A conversation with...

WILLIAM, MARIA, AND EDNA ORTEGA



Father, mother and sister of **HN WILLIAM F. ORTEGA**

Marine Expeditionary Force. Killed in action
June 18, 2010, Afghanistan



We are five sisters and him. He was born in Nicaragua. We came here when he was three years old. He left for deployment when he was in the process of becoming a citizen, so when he left, it was still in process. When he was killed, they told us that he became a citizen.

He enlisted with the navy, but in California he started working with the marines as a medic. And supposedly I hear that when they have respect for a person, they start calling him Doc. So he got that name really quickly... He was navy and he also became marine force. So, he was basically both.

On his last visit at home, he would just, like, start bear-hugging everybody; he'd grab you and squeeze you—wouldn't wanna let us go. When he woke up, he'd just be hugging, and so he went to sleep he'd hug everybody back. My mom was like, "What is wrong?" He's like, "Mom, just let me feel you. Let me hug you—that's it."

Before he left the house, he told my parents, "Just know that if I have to give my life for a fellow marine, I'm gonna do it... Those were the last words that he told my parents. And I remember my dad told him, he's like, "Don't go trying to be a hero, because heroes always die." Then he was like, "Wow, you know if I had to give my life for a fellow marine, I'm gonna do it, because he's my brother." And those were his last words.

My mom had come back from a restaurant with my dad, and there was a black car... They'd see it drive, the car then stops, and then drive back, but then go back; they were, like, indecisive of where they are going. My mom told my dad, "Something is wrong," and my dad is like, "Don't worry, that's nothing. Come inside, come inside." And then she's like, "No way, I have to see the car leave for me to go inside the house." And then they were waiting outside, and they saw them stop at one of our neighbors' house. And two people came out; they were dressed in the uniforms. At that moment, they talked to the neighbor; she had a son that was trying to enlist. So then when my dad saw that, he told her, "Don't worry, they are probably trying to look for her son." She's like, "I have to see the car leave." And then she saw they went back in the car, and then they drove. But then they stopped; and did a U-turn, and then they came back and they parked in front of our house. When they got off, they approached her and my dad. She said instantly she knew, because my brother spent a year preparing her. He was like, "Mom, if this ever happens, don't ask any questions; just know that I'm gone. 'Cause when they arrive, it's never good news."

We received my brother's body on Father's Day. My dad says that he felt torn apart, like he basically couldn't feel anything anymore. Basically, all his feelings and emotions were pulled out of him and thrown in the garbage. Father's Day has no significance for him anymore. Why celebrate Father's Day if—what's the point?

She started taking the things out of the zip-locked bag; she would, like, put them on the table, and then we recognized it 'cause there was my brother's wallet, things that he carried, and then it was his watch, his pens. She just lined it all up, and when she was taking it all out, like, you could see dirt fall from it. His wallet wasn't black anymore; it was like brown 'cause it was full of dirt. This is what was on him, when they found him. And he had a picture of them in the wallet. He had a Bible and a little notepad and stuff like that.

When he would call, he would talk to both of them. It would always have to be Mom first. We would get jealous 'cause we are like, "Why you always gotta go first?" She'd give him advice or they'd talk about the Bible, like she'd tell

him, “Oh, read this verse. Read that.” And then he like, “OK, Mom, well put Dad on.” And then when my dad got the phone, all she heard was, “Ha ha ha ha, oh my God ha ha,” like, all laughing. My dad said that when they would talk on the phone, he’d tell him stories about him going out to the bars or to the club. My mom said that she never knew what they talked about till right now: “Oh, no wonder they laughed so much.”

Till this day, we really don’t know what happened, though, because of all the versions that they told us. So, our casualty officer had told my parents there was somebody that wanted to talk to them. It was another medic’s father. His son got home, so I guess he told his father the story. He was on speaker, and he only spoke English, so I would be translating to them. “Oh, my son, you know, he’s very, like, devastated of what happened, and right now he was, like, not in the right state of mind to be talking to you guys, but he told me what happened with your son.” And the story he gave us was that they were on an actual battlefield, and my brother was aiding a wounded marine. He said that they screamed to him, “Doc, RPG” and, like, they had told him ahead of time for him to move because they said that my brother looked back, and when he saw it coming, he didn’t move. Like, he had the opportunity to move but he didn’t move. He just, like, covered the marine he was aiding. The casualty officer, she basically cut the conversation when he started getting into details. She cut the call and said, “OK, well, gotta go, we gotta go. I’ll make sure that they have your number,” and she didn’t give it to us. That’s when my parents start thinking, like, well maybe that was the true story, because why else would she cut that off and then not let us have, like, a deeper conversation with him?

This is a letter that her and my dad wanted to read in the ceremony, but they didn’t give them the opportunity to read it out loud, so my mom kept it.

My dad says, when he gets ready for work every morning, he comes through the living room; he just looks around, and when he goes here, he’s like, “Hi, good morning”... I’m gonna see you later, but not right now, not yet, won’t join you today. ‘Cause he knows that see you later is not going to be too soon. But it’s gonna be sooner than later.

He says he don’t like going to that area in the living room, because when he looks at his medals, he starts thinking, “What did you become to me? Pure medals... Where are you?” He’s like, “This is all I have of you, like you’re just medals right now. You’re just medals.” He says, “I told you to not try to be a hero because the heroes end up in the cemetery.” That’s why he doesn’t like this room.

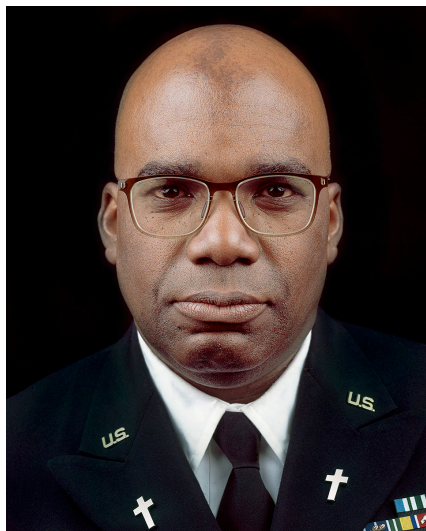


**Conversation was held in Spanish, which Edna Ortega translated into English for the author.*

A conversation with...

SFC BEAN

Naval Officer / Casualty Assistance Officer



CHAPLAIN (COLONEL) MINOR



SFC HERNANDEZ

I had been a full time Naval Officer / Casualty Assistance Officer for 6 months but had avoided doing the notifying portion of the job. We see movies where the family reacts very emotionally and I wasn't sure if I could hold it together myself while seeing families suffer such grief.

My boss had told me a few weeks prior that I needed to experience a notification so the next call that came in would be assigned to me. I had researched previous notification scripts so I would be familiar with the format. We must deliver those 7 or 8 sentences from memory. We can't be holding anything in our hands. It's important that this be eye to eye with the family.

The call came in on Memorial Day weekend in 2014. The Soldier had died in Germany after suffering from appendicitis. He had survived a few tours in Iraq only to have died while in a hospital bed for something very treatable. He was a career Soldier and was probably months away from retiring. The Soldier was married with children and they lived in Florida. The parents lived in Massachusetts and they are who I would be notifying. Chaplain Minor was going to meet me at my office and he would drive us the 40-50 minutes to our destination. He knew it was my first time, and he knew that I was nervous. There was a lot of silence on the ride.

We drove by the house to make sure we knew where it was and then we drove to the next block, pulled over, and called the Casualty Assistance Center at Ft Drum. *"We are at the destination. The house looks dark so we are not sure anyone is home."*

I asked the Chaplain to park a few houses away. I did not want this family to see me getting out of a car and adjusting my beret and uniform. I want their first view of us to be at their door. We went to the front door and I rang the doorbell and took a deep breath. We waited but no one came to the door. I walked over to the side of the house where the TV was blaring. I did not want to knock on that window. I felt that would be too disrespectful for such a profound mission.

We went back to the front door and continued to ring and knock but no luck. We were almost ready to give up when I saw another doorway on the right side of the house. It was very dark but we both walked over to that door and we found there was another doorbell there. I was getting confident, and relieved, that this notification would not happen tonight. I rang that door bell and waited.

A light switched on in the house. OH MY GOD! I am going to have to do this! An elderly man who had just woken up was coming towards the door.

When he gets to the door he squints, opens the door, sees two Soldiers in dress uniform just like his son, and... and he smiled. For a brief moment he thought this might be a pleasant visit from Soldiers who might have known his son. For that moment he was ready to welcome us into his home as honored guests. It still brings me to tears when I think of that smile because, at that moment, I knew that was going to be the last smile he would have on his face for a very long time. He soon realized we were the bearers of bad news and he lowered his head.

I don't even remember if I introduced Chaplain Minor and myself. No one really cares what our names are. What is it we are about to say? That is what is important.

"Sir, would you mind if we came inside?" We entered.

"Sir, is your wife home?" I asked.

"Yes, but she is sleeping." Mr. A. responded

"Sir, would you mind waking her? I have news for the both of you that is important."

I try to speak in a very empathetic way. He must already know my news is bad. Mr. A. refused to wake her. She is in bed and she should not be woken up tonight. I tried again to explain it might be best to have them together at this moment but he kept refusing. He was protecting her. He was protecting her from me and the words that were to come out of my mouth. He didn't want his wife, the mother of this Soldier, to hear these words.

I looked deep in his eyes and began, *"Sir, the Secretary of the Army has asked me to express his deep regret that your son, 1SG..., died in a military hospital in Germany earlier today."*

The Soldier's father was affected in the same way he would be if I were to punch him in the gut. He was sad but not overly emotional. It was more of a nervous reaction. We talked for a while and I asked him again,

"Sir, I think it might be best for you and your wife if you were to allow me to tell her this terrible news."

He thought about it and relented. He told me it might take a little while since she was in bed.

We heard Mr. A gently waking up his wife on the 2nd floor. There was silence, then some quiet whispering. "Please don't tell her," I thought. Then there was a loud chilling scream. Just thinking of it brings tears to my eyes, but I didn't cry there and then. He told her that their son was gone. He did my job. I could hear her slowly getting out of bed. She wanted to get this information confirmed by the Soldiers in her dining room.

Both the parents were in their mid to late 70's and had some mobility issues. It took them a while to come down stairs. The Chaplain and I were standing when she reached us. She reached out, took my hand, and said, *"Is it true?"* *"Yes ma'am. It is true."*

She fell to the floor. I felt terrible that I had not invited her to sit before confirming her son's death. Mr. A was too old and grief stricken to help his wife off the floor so I picked her up and sat her in a dining room chair. I then sat right by her side and held her hand.

We talked for a long time. They wanted to tell us all about their son. We learned about the Bronze Star he received from his service in Iraq. We learned about all the awards and medals he received while in the Army and even before that. They took us into a room where they had his pictures and awards on the wall. I wanted to know how many other siblings the Soldier had so I said, *"Sir, how many children do you have?"*

As soon as those words came out of my mouth I regretted it. He had to think. Before I came to his door he had 4 children. Now he has 3. I would learn from that mistake and rephrase that question in the future.

Mr. & Mrs. A apologized for not being better hosts. *"We should have offered you a cup of coffee."* I just could not imagine how anyone could think of being polite to us after being the bearers of such bad news but I have learned that this gesture of being a host to us is very common.

I got home very very late that night. I went to bed and I cried. I held my emotions back while performing this honorable mission, but now I wept for this family.

What's Left Behind by Inbal Abergil

On View:

February 3 - April 1 2023

Opening Reception and Artist Talk:

Friday, February 3rd 5-8pm

Pictura Gallery

FAR Center for Contemporary Arts

202 S Rogers St, Bloomington IN 47404

812.336.0000 | picturagallery.com



Scan the QR Code
to learn more or visit
inbalabergil.com