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The Birth of an Activist

By Sara Rich

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As Suzanne and I attended the rally for 1st Lt. Ehren Watada on the first day of his court-martial, she turned to me and said, "Mom, where are the kids my age? Where is my generation?" I replied that if it had not been for what she had been through, she would not be there protesting with me. She would be home sleeping or actively involved in the self-centered life of a normal 22-year-old.

Has Suzanne learned a lesson from this terrible experience? Oh yes, she has. The Army has taken a semi-apathetic, self-centered teenager and turned her into a fierce warrior for peace and justice. As we kept saying, or I should say chanting, everything happens for a reason. I said this the entire time Suzanne was in Iraq. I knew she was there for a higher purpose; she was walking through the fire to come out the other side truly changed.

Suzanne was not against the war in Iraq when she went there. She completed her training with just the right amount of brainwashing to tell me what an awful person she thought Jane Fonda was for not supporting the troops in Vietnam, and how she really liked being a soldier. Hooha! She was proud to be doing the work of a military police officer and proud of her nation. I tried to bring her back to reality, but to no avail.

She suffered in Iraq, but could not talk about the depths of her trauma, because good soldiers suck it up. She built a wall around her emotions the best she could, but still there were things that happened to her that she could not keep from me. I kept careful notes and saved her emails and chats. She knew I was doing this and felt better that if something happened to her I would know the real story of the men who were in charge of her in Iraq.

I sent a copy of "Fahrenheit 911" by Michael Moore for her to watch. She showed it to some of her fellow soldiers. They were disgusted. This was around the time of the elections, and morale was low in Camp Lima. I saw a slight glimmer of hope that Suzanne was making baby steps to think for herself again.

That changed the longer she stayed in Iraq; she became more depressed and there was nothing I could do to encourage her or lift her spirits. At this time she was talking about killing herself.

When Suzanne returned from Iraq, I asked her if we could take action against the "MLester" now? She replied with a flat voice that she couldn't take action against him. She was unwilling to dredge up those horrific memories. In addition, she had to redeploy to Iraq within the next 18 months, and it would not be safe to be a whistleblower against someone who had power to make her life a living hell.

I urged her to get help for post-traumatic stress disorder. She refused my help saying she was fine, and that there was no way she could deal with that "stuff" until she was out of the Army. I stopped asking and just did what I could to support her.

About a month after she returned from Iraq, she called me in hysterics. I asked her to slow down and tell me what was going on. She told me through her tears that she was sick of being treated like a whore by the Army and was going to officially report it this time. "Tell me what happened," I asked. She told me about her sergeant telling her to report to his bed, naked. She said she was going to make a formal complaint and break her chain of command. She sounded scared to death, but I quietly told her it was the right thing to do and that these guys needed to be stopped. She courageously told on her squad leader. I was so proud of her for finally standing up for herself.

The US Army interrogated her and treated her as if she were the criminal. They told her to look up the word honesty in the dictionary and implied she must have been seeking revenge against the sergeant. The worst part of it was that the rest of the unit shunned her for some time, because in their eyes she had let her unit down and been disloyal to the unit. What she did was an abomination in their eyes, making her not only a whore but a bitch.

Suzanne put her head down and continued her work. When she was told she was going back to Iraq eleven months after her first deployment ended, she questioned the order because she was supposed to have eighteen months of stabilization time. The military representation told her that she must sign a document waiving her rights to her stabilization time. I was furious and called my representative and my senators. They all gave me the same answer: they needed a privacy act waiver signed by Suzanne. When I asked Suzanne, she told me she was okay and was just going to go to Iraq. She said it wasn't so bad and she could handle it. I sat on my hands and did nothing, but emotionally prepared for her to return to war.

At that point, Suzanne was not thinking about opposition to the war; she was fully focused on survival and getting through this deployment safely.

Confronting imminent redeployment, she went AWOL. Later, the Army would contend that she went AWOL because of her mother's political beliefs. I only wished it were that. If it were because of my political beliefs, she never would have gone to Iraq in the first place. Then they tried to say it was because of her own antiwar beliefs. That would have been a dream come true. But the truth was that my daughter went AWOL out of pure fear: fear of what her command had done to her in the first deployment, and the rejection of being treated like a "deployment whore" again. This was not a decision; it was a reaction.

All through Suzanne's AWOL time, she was not active against the war. She listened to me as I became more and more outraged at what our administration was doing - abusing our military and committing genocide on the Iraqi people - but she was not involved. When I asked her to speak at a Eugene rally last March, she said she could not speak about the war and her experience. The idea overwhelmed her. So we wrote a piece together, in which she said that maybe the United States needed someone to come liberate us! That gave me a glimmer of hope that she was waking up from this brainwashing and might become politically active.

Two days before her arrest, Suzanne and I watched a video by a young US Army lieutenant named Ehren Watada. He was going to refuse to deploy to Iraq. We were both very impressed and talked about his courage.

Without warning, it happened. Suzanne was traumatically arrested in our home and taken to jail in handcuffs. The Eugene police officers had no warrant - just an email on the police car computer screen saying, "hey buddy will you pick this one up for us?" She was strip-searched and denied urgent medical care for an abscessed tooth for 12 hours. She says she wept harder than ever in the cell by herself that night.

They took her to Fort Lewis a few days later and put her under the supervision of the original harassing sergeant from Iraq. She called me in tears again. I made some phone calls. She was moved to a new unit and a no-contact order was issued for this sergeant. A month later, she was allowed to come home for a visit.

At the Oregon Country Fair, I tried to introduce her to Amy Goodman, but Suzanne refused to engage and merely walked away. I made my apologies to Amy about her abruptness.

Despite her apparent lack of interest, we had a rally for Suzanne on her 22nd birthday at Fort Lewis. Ehren Watada was at the rally, along with his mother Carolyn. Suzanne had an instant connection with Ehren and continues to see him as one of her personal heroes. Suzanne was shocked and embarrassed, but grateful about how many people were there to support her.

There was no overt change in her attitude until one day Suzanne watched the movie "Sir! No Sir!" and suddenly put it all together. She called me in a frantic state, saying, "MOM! I watched the movie! We have to DO something to get the truth to the troops so they will stop fighting" My heart soared, and I started to give her books and other literature about what the administration was doing to our country. She literally devoured the information.

I was invited to attend the national conference for Vets for Peace (VFP), and we asked Suzanne's attorney if she could go. He replied that she was forbidden to attend. We snuck her in anyway. Then some real magic began. She got to meet with a group of powerful veterans: Iraq Veterans Against the War (IVAW) and Colonel Ann Wright. This was a HUGE turning point for Suzanne. She spent many hours with other Iraq women vets, and Suzanne's eyes began to sparkle for the first time in forever. She told me, "Mom, these women really understand me. They know what I have been through." It was so good to have these connections for her to build her strength and energy to start speaking out.

We had a press conference that weekend at the VFP conference about Suzanne's case and sexual assault in the military. Many powerful women vets talked about what their experience had been and about their support for Suzanne. What they did not know was that Suzanne was on the second floor looking down on us. She watched the entire press conference with unblinking eyes, and I think this was when she saw just how impactful her speaking out has been on the women of this nation.

I finally, as a mother and an activist, had hope for my daughter's emotional and mental well-being.

As time passed, the military officials at Fort Lewis played their hideous hurry-up-and-wait games with Suzanne's life. Suzanne made some very good friends among the people who started Camp Suzanne; they were caring and supportive. Suzanne found herself leaving the barracks in the evening to go and spend time with them. She also would sneak off base to attend Ehren Watada rallies and wear her Ehren Watada T-shirt. I warned her that it could be used against her, and she wore it anyway. I was bursting with pride.

One night at home, Suzanne was getting ready to head back to Fort Lewis. (She was allowed to come home to Eugene every other week to see her civilian psychologist.) She asked, "What was that lady's name who has the radio show and was at the fair?"

"Amy Goodman," I replied, my curiosity piqued.

She asked, "What is the name of her show?"

I replied, "Democracy Now!" She asked if I thought she could download it onto her podcasts. My heart jumped for joy. I was so excited at the thought of my daughter listening to Democracy Now! When Amy called a few weeks later, I handed the phone to Suzanne, telling her Amy Goodman was on the phone and wanted to talk to her. Suzanne's jaw dropped; she was so in awe of Amy and her work. The next day, Suzanne did her first radio interview on Democracy Now!

When Suzanne was asked by the Army to sign a statement, including a part that says she was not sexually abused, she called me once again, saying, "Mom, do you know what they want me to sign?"

She explained it to me, and I asked her what she wanted to do about it.

She spoke strongly. "I am not going to sign it; it's not true."

This was another turning point where Suzanne could have just signed the paper, not told me what it said in its entirety, and avoided being stripped of her rank and sent to prison. She refused the deal and would not sign. Her attorneys were furious at her for refusing to sign, but she held her ground. The attorneys went back to the drawing board and came up with a new "deal." With this deal, she signed a statement and she experienced a summary court-martial with an uncertain outcome: she would probably go to prison, but it would not be for a year, more likely a month.

She faced her court-martial with dignity and courage. It had to be one of the hardest days of her life. She was stripped of all rank and sent to prison for thirty days. I could only imagine the inner strength it

took her to stand up for herself and do what was right. The only time she cried during the court-martial was when she explained what the "MLester" did to her in Iraq and how humiliated she felt.

Suzanne went to prison, but she remained strong and resolved. She did what she had to do to stay true to herself and not let the Army break her down.

When Suzanne was released from prison, she was much quieter and determined. She came home to Eugene for the weekend, and for the first time wore her Iraq Veterans Against the War T-Shirt. She looked at me with a wide smile, and told me she never wants to take this shirt off. It was good to have her at a rally and holding her signs for peace.

During the time of Ehren Watada's court-martial, she attended the rally with me on the first day. She wore her Watada shirt and got on stage with other IVAW members to support Carlos Arredondo when he spoke about the death of his son, who had been a Marine in Iraq.

The next day, she dressed in her civilian clothes, brazenly went to the visitor center and registered for a pass to attend a day of Ehren's court-martial, where she sat next to Colonel Ann Wright. When she told me she was going to do this, I warned her to use caution.

She replied, "Mom, what will they do to me? Send me back to Iraq to be raped and/or killed? Send me to prison? They can't reduce my rank any more. Ehren is taking a stand for all of us, and I want to be there to support him and let him know he is not alone."

She went to the trial and was punished later by having all of her civilian clothes taken away and having a guard on her at all times. We laughed at this and took it all in stride.

A few days later, a photographer from the New York Times Magazine was coming to Fort Lewis to take pictures for a piece coming out about women in the military. When the command officers at Fort Lewis heard this, they told Suzanne that if she participated in this interview she would be face administrative action again - aka another court-martial. Once again, Suzanne stood up to the command, refused to take no for an answer and called her JAG attorney. He worked it out so she could do the photo shoot.

Now, Suzanne is in Fort Lee, Virginia, doing Advanced Infantry Training to be a shipping and receiving clerk. She goes to class every day wearing a uniform with a combat patch, a blank spot where her rank used to be, and the name SWIFT for everyone to see. Many people have put this together and know who she is. They tell her she did the right thing. She will be sent to Fort Irwin, California, in April to await further orders.

It is amazing to me how much we have to thank the Army for. They tried to break my daughter down and shut her up, and in the process created a strong advocate for women around the world. Imagine if they had done the right thing and protected her from "MLester" in the first place, or had given her an immediate medical discharge when our attorney contacted Fort Lewis right after she went AWOL and was diagnosed with PTSD. How simple and right it could have been. But the US military did not understand what it was doing, or Suzanne's fortitude.

So, when Suzanne asks where her generation is in the peace movement, I tell her to look in the mirror and all around her. All of the other soldiers she knows are just activists waiting to be born, and she could be just the one to help them wake up. She has the story, the energy and the intelligence to be a powerful activist. She just needs to be visible and speak out!

I am so proud to be her mother.

Peace,

Sara Lantz Rich, MSW.
