

Wounded Warriors share stories, advice



from Staff Reports
photos by Melissa Bates
graphic by Chris Weber

Staff of *The Courtland Chronicle* had the distinct honor of interviewing members of the Virginia Wounded Warriors Program. These veterans from the latest conflict in the Middle East shared stories, insights, and advice. Summations from the conversations follow below.

Steve Matos
The phrase “You don’t realize what you have until it’s gone” is one that is usually taken for granted these days. But for some people it is especially true.
For instance, just recently members of *The Courtland Chronicle* staff had the chance to interview Steve Matos, a Marine Corps veteran, through the Wounded Warriors program. For him, this was a tough lesson to learn when he was stationed in Iraq.
In Iraq, you don’t get the special privilege of a shower or a home cooked meal. You don’t get the cell phones, televisions, and iPods that so many people are dependent



on at home. Marines serve with priorities in mind - eating comes secondary to fighting. The supply chain must keep up.
Another, more emotional thing that Matos said was hard to get used to was not being able to see his family. When Matos left for Iraq, he left behind a wife and a son who was only a few months old. By the time he returned, his son was already two years old. Matos emphasized how difficult this was for him.
After having the opportunity to interview a war veteran, you feel proud that there is someone making these sacrifices to protect your country. However, you also feel much more appreciative and grateful for the things you have in life.



Kevin Williams
Slurpees and Christmas morning. Kevin Williams, a Navy veteran of the First Gulf War and Operation Iraqi Freedom, missed that strange pairing more than anything else while he served overseas. Williams shared that and much more with the staff in an informal interview as part of the Virginia Wounded Warriors Program.
We had the opportunity to meet and greet with Williams in December when he and several other veterans came to Courtland and met with the Journalism II-IV classes. This was a homecoming of sorts for Williams, who went to Courtland and was a member of the third graduating class. He was raised in Fredericksburg, and despite having seen the world, decided to come back and make his home here, decades later.
Williams discussed dozens of aspects of the war, sharing both personal stories and larger commentaries on society in general. He talked about his family, and how his father told him not to go into the Marines. Obviously, he didn’t listen and joined the Navy to work with the Marines. He chatted about seeing amazing sights and learning about new cultures.
But what really stood out was the newfound appreciation each of the staff members had, both for America’s Warriors and our own everyday commodities. Warriors everywhere sacrifice these everyday luxuries, trading them for dehydrated meals and sleeping bags. Coming face-to-face with such a sacrifice is enough to make you grateful for even the most basic goods. Like, say, a Slurpee.

Jeffery Powell
Jeffery Powell gave 10 years of his life to the Marines. While in Iraq, his job was to build bunkers, put up barbed wire, and pretty much do anything his command needed him to do. Powell shared that one of the main reasons he went into the service was because it’s what his father did and was something he always wanted to do. Powell also said the experience matured him more than he expected and made him really appreciate the small things in life.
Powell shared how much he hated the new advancements in technology and the obsession over them after his first time returning to the states; moreover, he also explained how much he wanted to go back to the Middle East, because it made him feel worth something.
“I wanted to go back. It sounds weird, because I hate that place, but now that I’m back [in the United States] I have to respect them as humans. It was simple over there – just don’t get killed,” commented Powell.
Powell sacrificed a large majority of his young adulthood to protect his country. “I do regret that. But I’m proud of what I did. 80 percent proud, 20 percent regret.” Despite some regret, Powell loves the Corps and his brothers and sisters in arms.
Powell is still struggling with various issues associated with combat, but with the help of the Virginia Wounded Warriors Program, a project focused on fellow warriors helping one another with their struggles due to the war, he is in transition back to society.



Travis Kimble
Imagine being isolated from family and friends; only left with fellow veterans for companionship. Over time, as you are being stationed overseas, you begin to build a brotherhood with the men around you and form a family. Many men and women serve our country every day, and they experience such transformations.
But with the joyous experiences there also are the negative experiences. One veteran, Travis Kimble, shared his own story and how he felt during his tenure in Iraq. The discussion consisted of such subjects as the lessons he learned and his overall thoughts and emotions regarding his tour of duty.
As journalists, the staff found it intriguing that soldiers stationed overseas felt isolated from the country they fight for and defend. It would take several weeks just to hear the smallest news.
Not only are soldiers separated from general

world news but personal family news as well. Kimble was always patient, waiting to hear from his loved ones at home, but it was difficult at times.
One would expect the soldiers to have given up at times, but like the champions that they are, they soldiered through and continued fighting – so that we could sleep comfortably in bed without fear.



Mahlon Johnson
“You have to remember war is the norm there,” Mahlon Johnson said as he described his experiences overseas. As he continued to talk, what struck us the most was his obvious commitment to his goal: to educate the people over there about correct medical procedures to save the lives of their people.
“I had to break the barrier and the cultural differences between us. To them, we were the Devil, because their whole lives we had been portrayed as the enemy,” Johnson explained. Not only did he have to deal with that, but he also had to overcome the stigmas about helping those in need.
The problem is that most of Iraqis believe that if they hurt someone mortally, it is because they have the will of their god, Allah, to do so. This hinders foreigners from being able to help the wounded get medical attention.
“I had been there for six months, and I still had a problem with trying to get them to listen. It is hard to get people to change their ways when they have always lived that way,” Johnson stated.
While he hopes that he made some sort of impact on the people, he knows that it is not a definite thing. “It’s not enough for them to know how to do it, they have to do it,” commented Johnson.
Coming back home has made Johnson more aware of what people take for granted, such as school, family, material goods, food, and showers.
“In high school, I’d always go snowboarding with my friends on the weekends. I didn’t like school, and I didn’t see the need for college. When I came back, all I could think about was how people don’t understand what they have. I appreciate everything now, especially my wife and daughter.”
Johnson showed us that in the big scheme of things, we all should cherish what we have instead of the material things and that we should always strive for success.

The staff of *The Courtland Chronicle* greatly appreciates all members of the armed forces. You do not hear this enough, nor do you receive enough thanks, but *thank you*.