

The Birmingham News

UA students' film on veterans grabs focus

By Tom Gordon

Feb. 5, 2010

Until she met Iraq war veteran Dick Powers, Elizabeth Jones was not aware of the difficulties that veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars – or veterans of any war – face when they try to resume civilian life.

Jones learned more when she and Powers produced “Searching for Normal,” a film that focused on the phenomenon, for their University of Alabama film-making class. Now that the film has been recognized by the Department of Veterans Affairs and posted on the federal agency’s Facebook page, she is hoping its message will reach an even wider audience.



Dick Powers and Elizabeth Jones, two Mountain Brook High graduates, created the documentary “Searching for Normal” for a UA class.

“I really had never thought about veterans post combat in a negative way,” Jones said. “It seemed like yellow ribbons can come down, the parade stops and everybody just kinda goes back to life as normal.

“I didn’t realize the extent of damage that...any war can do for years afterwards, and that it’s not just people who are diagnosed with PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), it’s not just people who are receiving treatment from the VA, it’s pretty much across the board.

“I thought it was the end of your journey when you came home, but it really is just the beginning.”

The film, made two years ago and featured in Birmingham’s 2008 Sidewalk Film Festival, features four vets discussing life after tours in Iraq. It also features narrative comments from Powers, a West Point graduate who, like Jones, is a Mountain Brook High School grad.

“Dick obviously was the one who brought the idea to the table,” said Jones, who will graduate in the spring. “He really just kinda gave a testimonial about what his experience had been like upon returning home and ... the different, unexpected issues he had faced in reintegrating back into civilian life and trying to adjust.”

“We all come back changed,” Powers says at the start of the nearly 10-minute film. “Our challenge becomes finding a way to return to normal.”

Powers is a UA School of Law grad who now is a trial lawyer for the U.S. Department of Justice in Atlanta. In an interview, he said making the film was a cathartic experience for him, and that it strikes a chord with other vets because it shows some of the experiences they often share when they are deployed and when they are back home.

“Having a way to talk about that with each other, or to others, is part of the challenge, so any way you can do it is helpful, I think,” he said.

In his narrative, Powers talks about how one of his grandfathers, an infantry officer who served in Vietnam, came home unable to get close to his family and died “a divorced, alcoholic war hero.”

Powers also was an infantry officer, and he was in Iraq from March 2004 to March 2005, with the Army’s 1st Cavalry Division.

“After I returned home, my marriage began to fall apart, and ultimately ended in divorce,” he says. “Not sure what to make of my experiences both in combat and returning home, I needed answers.”

The VA posted a link to the film on its Facebook page in late January, after Brandon Friedman, director of new media for the VA, met Powers at a conference in Washington.

As of Jan. 25, according to a UA news release, “44 people noted that they liked the post and another 29 took the time to thank the filmmakers, share their own experiences or express support for returning soldiers.”

Documenting Justice, the film-making class taken by Powers and Jones, is a program of the UA Center for Ethics and Social Responsibility and the Department of Telecommunication and Film.

“These are stories I needed to hear, stories we all need to hear,” Powers says.

E-mail: tgordon@bhamnews.com