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Casualties of Conflict A father's pride carries the day at one of the Voices of Conflict performances

The father used to go to war movies all the time, but not anymore. Now it's about remembering.

"I don't like explosions," says Will Perez Sr., a 48-year-old Norwalk remodeling contractor who lost his 24-year-old son, Army Specialist Wilfredo "Junior" Perez Jr., in Iraq, in late July 2003. They were best friends.

Lost in the controversy over *Voices in Conflict*, the Iraq War play created by Wilton High drama students that school officials sought to stop, then silence, is the impact it had on those who attended any of the six SRO June performances in Fairfield and New York—like Iraq War veterans National Guard Sgt. Michael Donnelly, Army Lt. Paul Rieckhoff and Navy Lt. Charles Anderson. Rieckhoff and Anderson are portrayed in the play.



"I cried three times when I first saw it," Donnelly told the audience during a post-performance discussion. "These kids have healed me."

"Giving voices to the soldiers not being heard honors them," said Rieckhoff, who participated in the invasion of Iraq and now heads the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans Association.

And then there was Anderson, a retired medic suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome, who strode from audience to stage at the prestigious Public Theater in New York, approached the young actor who played him, removed one of the medals he was awarded in Iraq from his Navy shirt and gave it to the student.

A play about homegrown, American-style patriotism, *Voices in Conflict* is a five-star salute to the American fighting men and women who have just returned from Iraq. In their own unedited words, these true patriots tell us why they fought, what they saw, how they survived and their hopes and dreams for a better world.

Four of the 19 soldiers portrayed in *Voices* didn't make it back. Junior Perez, the first soldier from Norwalk to die in the line of duty since 1969, was killed along with two other soldiers on July 26, 2003, in Baqubah, 45 miles northeast of Baghdad, by a hand grenade dropped from a 5th floor window of the children's ward of the hospital his Fourth Infantry Division was protecting.

Why Junior enlisted, how he got to Iraq and how he died aren't explored in the play. But *Voices in Conflict* does incorporate his last letter home, which arrived at the house of his mother, Ann Marie Eccles, in Ridgewood, N.Y., a couple days after the family learned he was gone.

Since Junior died, his father's consuming passion has been keeping his son's memory alive. Would Will Perez (who is my brother-in-law) see a play about the war that took his son and in which his son is a character? The parents of the female student actor playing Junior extended a personal invitation to him for the premiere, leaving him tickets, but Will, ambivalent, sent word that he couldn't make it. Invited to the Public, he again declined, saying, "It's too hard, too much." Told an encore performance was added June 22, he remained conflicted: "I don't think so."

Will called me two days before the show. "Look, is Friday really the last performance?" he asked.

"Far as I know."

"I thought you said the one in New York was the last one."

"It was, but they added the Fairfield encore last week before the three New York shows."

"You never said anything," he says.

"It was after we talked."

"So this is the last one?"

"Right now."

"There could be another?"

"Can't say."

"I'm coming," he said, finally.

While the play made international news, on this night the cast was focused on one man who lives one town over—Junior's father; the 16 student actors and teacher-director Bonnie Dickinson hoped he'd be there. Through Junior's words, they have come to know and love Will Perez's first-born son.

The theater is standing room only. Will and his wife Vicki are seated fifth row center.

Junior's letter frames the play, his persona made more compelling by the role being played by a beautiful young student actress, one who has never been nervous before a performance, until now, knowing that Junior's father might be in the audience.

"You know, if something does happen to me and I can't make it home, you have to buck up, be the man and take care of everybody." These are Junior's words she is speaking, and they open the play. Later, she launches into Junior's letter with, "Wazzup little guy!"—nailing his exaggerated Brooklyn accent. The letter brims with life, is filled with Junior's irrepressible humor and selfless love.

Crouched in a Humvee at 4 a.m., waiting for orders to fire mortars, Junior is delivering a seminar to his 15-year-old half-brother on "how to talk to girls" while simultaneously trying to underscore some larger points. Don't make my mistake, he says, "You want to be The Man? Finish school first." From this letter emerges the essence of Junior's spirit and character. Then the audience learns of his fate.

The stage goes dark and the audience erupts into a rousing standing ovation. Will and Vicki are also on their feet, clapping.

During the closing question-and-answer session, the exchanges between the cast and the audience are lively. "This play was possible because you students stood up and refused to back down," a man says. "This affects the whole country. Down the road, in Kansas, some class facing censorship will say, 'Remember what those kids in Wilton, Connecticut, did!' "

Ms. Dickinson asks for one last question. No hands. Then Will Perez and two others raise theirs. Ms. Dickinson, squinting in the theater lights, thought she recognized Will Perez Sr. from a photograph and said, "The man in the middle, yes, Mr.—" stopping short of calling him by name. A girl brings him a microphone and he tells the cast, who are unaware of who he is, "You should all be very, very proud of yourselves. You did a terrific job, and this play should not die here."

Ms. Dickinson interjects. "I know you," she says, voice cracking with emotion. "You are Junior's father." As the audience realizes that this is the real father of the son who died in the play, they began standing as Dickinson, suppressing tears, gathers herself and continues, "I want you to know that Junior will never never ever, ever be forgotten. We love Junior for what he's taught us all about love and loss." Now everyone is standing, applauding, except Vicki and Will, who sit in the middle of the theater accepting this impromptu moment of emotional support, in which art and life have become one. As if grace has descended, the applause shows no sign of stopping. It rises in sustained appreciation until every person in the theater is standing, facing Will.

Junior Perez's "moment of silence"—two hundred and twenty five strangers clapping in solemn acknowledgement of his service and sacrifice. The ovation continues unabated until Will stands up to stop it; he raises his arm in thanks as the house lights come up, and the accolade finally tails off.

Before Will can move, a woman with tears in her eyes grabs his hand and offers thanks. A steady stream of people followed. A teenage girl, a messenger for the actors, invites him down to the stage; the cast wants to meet him: he could meet them onstage or privately backstage, whichever he prefers. Will slowly follows her, accepting acknowledgement along the way. Stepping onto the stage, Will immediately finds the girl who played Junior. She smiles shyly as they shake hands. Then Will places his hands on her shoulders, leans over to create private space between them, and—like a father speaking to a daughter—whispers something to her that she will remember for the rest of her life. The other student actors slowly and deliberately make their way toward Will, then surround him like soldiers in Junior's platoon, waiting to meet the father of one of their own who has fallen.

Afterwards, Will and Bonnie Dickinson meet and talk about her choice of having a girl play Junior. Will understands how having a girl play his son "forces the audience to have to imagine Junior" for themselves.

"I could imagine him very well," said the father, as the fourth anniversary of his son's death approaches.