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## CROSSING THE MILITARY-CIVILIAN DIVIDE

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According to NBC, there are approximately 95,000 uniformed military personnel assigned to various commands in the San Diego area alone. Counting the families of those in service, that number increases to about 175,000. San Diego is ranked as the second largest military town in the country, the first being Monterey, California. Author and San Diego native Betsy Marro believes there is a non-intentional gap, a lack of connection, between civilians in San Diego and the armed forces that serve them every day. In fact, she believes the gap is universal.

“Often people don’t think about how their lives are connected to a service member’s, but they should,” said Marro. “We are all connected more than we know.”

Last week, Marro partnered with Point Loma’s public library and [So Say We All](#), a non-profit literary arts organization, to hold a panel called, “Crossing the Military-Civilian Divide.” The goal of the panel was to bridge the gap between civilians and military members through stories and conversation. The idea for the panel came to Marro after publishing her book, *Casualties*. When she and her family moved to San Diego, Marro realized the importance of understanding the prevalent military community around her.



“As a civilian, it was important for me to understand the people I was making friends with,” said Marro. “I thought of their families and thought, ‘how do they do this?’”

Marro then began writing *Casualties*, a story of a mother and her son who decides to enlist into the Army. When the book came out, Marro said she saw the conversations that were sparked because of her book and decided to find a way to further bridge the gap between the civilian and military worlds.

Marro connected with Christine Gonzales, the branch manager of Point Loma’s public library, and Justin Hudnall, the executive director of So Say We All. The three discussed how they could involve civilians in veteran discussions, with the goal of encouraging connectivity as well as understanding.

“Advocating for veterans is all fine and good,” said Hudnall. “But when we have an opportunity to have an actual conversation between the public and men and women who served, a lot more room for nuance and impact arises.”

Many veterans had worked with So Say We All to develop stories from their military careers into books and essays. Point Loma’s public library had been the first of three other libraries in the state to pilot the veterans resource center program. According to Gonzales, it was the perfect fit.

“I always knew I wanted to provide services to the military,” said Gonzales. “This panel seemed like a beautiful way to do it.”

The panel would host authors, some veterans and others friends and family of military members, who had published military books and essays. The panelists would read portions of their written works and then hold a discussion where they answer any questions or respond to any comments attendees may have. The objective would be to allow open discussion between the panelists and attendees as well as between military and civilian attendees. The panel was held February 15 at 6:30 pm in the front conference center of the library. Civilian and military guests young and old, ages ranging from 30s to 80s, trickled into the room till nearly every seat was full.



Panelists Adam Stone, Michelle Kerouac, Derrick Woodford, Sue Diaz and Marro herself greeted each other and guests like old friends as they took their seats and Gonzales stepped up to the podium to get the panel started.

Marro began the readings with a chapter from *Casualties*. Guests nodded and sighed in empathy as the author read the dialogue between mother and newly enlisted son. Diaz next read her book, *Minefields of the Heart*, based off of essays of her experience as the mother of a soldier on his second deployment. Hands flew to mouths as Diaz reads in a shaky voice her account of receiving a call from the Army with the news that her son had been injured by an IED.

“The casualties of war go far beyond the numbers at the pentagon,” Diaz said to the audience. “They don’t count the number of those injured, the number of those whose lives will never be the same.”

Stone, a veteran who had served 20 years in the Marines, read from a story he developed with SSWA called *Oblivion*, telling audiences of the horrific choice he had to make whether or not to shoot a 13 year old boy working for the Taliban.

“Young marines tend to treat life as just another simulation,” said Stone. “But I saw my own children’s faces as I looked at this boy.”

Kerouac, Stone’s wife and former Navy nurse, also read from a story she developed with SSWA about her experience on the home front during Stone’s deployment. Her mother-in-law had been in the hospital for leukemia and the effect on Kerouac was great.

“It was easy to hide my reality from those I loved who lived far away, but not from her,” said Kerouac. “She was the one I confided in. She was my greatest support.”

Woodford read personal accounts to guests about his career as a gay man the military during the “don’t ask, don’t tell” initiative.

“It was so new the paperwork hadn’t even been changed yet,” said Woodford who recalls getting a pink sheet with a black marker line through the question, “Are you a homosexual?”

Woodford also narrates about his reconciliation with his mother during his enlistment and before her death.

There was a common theme of isolation and disconnection among the authors and their experiences with the military, showing a disconnection with the civilian world that had developed from misunderstanding and lack of an ear to listen. In the front row, a bearded man in a blue striped shirt asked the panelists, “How can we cross that divide?”

Stone responded, “Listen but don’t push...go beyond ‘thank you for your service.’ Take a genuine interest. Lots of military men and women are carrying demons that they can’t subdue.”

“This panel is about showing that connecting is not difficult,” said Marro. “You can imagine your way into other people’s shoes. If you’re a mother, a sister, a son, a daughter—you can connect. Life is life. Family is family. We can all start there.”

After the panel, Kerouac was approached by other veterans who expressed their appreciation for the vulnerability and honesty Kerouac and the other panelists showed attendees. According to Woodford, the panel did much more than open up the lines of communication.

“Panels like this break down barriers and stereotypes,” said Woodford. “That night, people found common ground, not just civilians and military members, but between military members from other generations.”

Nearly all the panelists have expressed interest in speaking at an event like this again and all of them believe more discussions and panels like this should be held regularly. Gonzales agrees.

“I could see this continuing to a program we have once a year and maybe expand it more,” said Gonzales who had been getting calls from people prior to the panel who wanted to have a resource table at the program or knows someone who is a vet who would want to speak.

“I hope we’re able to offer a lot more town-hall discussion and conversation style events, not just with veterans but refugees, immigrants, really any population that is spoken about more than heard directly from,” said Hudnall. “Conversation only makes things better and silence is dangerous, for the individual as well as our culture.”

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