

Marilee Swirczek: From Carson City to the world, with love

BY MARILEE SWIRCZEK,

I've always urged my students to dream great dreams. I saw one dream realized in September when I, with colleague Kevin Burns; poet Amy Roby; and Midge Breeden, mother of poet Teresa Breeden, traveled to Wisconsin for the national debut of our class project that became a touring exhibition, "Always Lost: A Meditation on War."

The exhibit at Western Nevada College in summer 2009 captured visitors' hearts with Pulitzer Prize-winning Iraq/Afghanistan combat photos (Dallas Morning News); literary work they inspired; photos of nearly 5,000 U.S. service members who perished in Iraq and Afghanistan; portraits of student-veterans; and more. The gallery became a sacred space to contemplate the sacrifices made by fellow Americans and the costs of their loss to all of us. A guest book comment read, "a national treasure."

One visitor, Mary Staudenmaier from Wisconsin, convinced us the exhibit merited wings. "It should be seen by every American," she said. With individual donations, a Nevada Arts Council grant, and college support, we reformatted the exhibit and sent it, with love, to the Midwest.

In the town of Marinette, nestled in America's heartland near Lake Michigan, "Always Lost" was introduced to the world. Our University of Wisconsin colleagues felt a "moral imperative" to host the exhibit. Gallery curator Dr. James LaMalfa called it the most important exhibit he'd installed in four decades.

We reunited with the family of Spc. Noah Pierce of Minnesota, 22, who killed himself after two combat tours in Iraq, and whose photograph and poetry is featured in "Always Lost." Pierce's story will be featured in the HBO documentary "WARTORN: 1861-2010," which debuts Veteran's Day.

Speaking with families of the fallen made the importance of "Always Lost" hit home. Dawn Bayer described how her son, Army Pvt. Steven T. Drees, 19, was shot in the head when insurgents attacked his unit in Afghanistan. Dawn, her husband, and Drees's twin brother flew to Germany, where Drees died. His organs then saved three other lives. Dawn kept thanking us. Her son's photo is on the memorial wall, panel 21.

In 2011 "Always Lost" will travel in Wisconsin and New York and in 2012 to Minnesota, before returning to Nevada and then going to Michigan. We dream of sending "Always Lost" to all 50 states.

The dream doesn't end there. We dream of sending our photographer to Walter Reed Army Medical Center to include catastrophically wounded veterans. We dream of awarding a scholarship to a veteran at each host campus. Our dream includes keeping the memorial wall current; Major Burns says we will leave no one behind.

We need your help to honor those who gave their lives and those who made it home. Please go to www.wnc.edu/foundation/ to make a donation or contact me at 775-445-4284 or mswircze@wnc.edu

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- Marilee Swirczek lives in Carson City and teaches English at Western Nevada College.

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