



Jeffrey Lucey, a reservist in the United States Marines, returned from active duty in Iraq remarkably changed, according to therapist Mark Nickerson '75.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE LUCEY FAMILY

several occasions to present their family's ordeal to psychologists and social workers as a case study at professional conferences. Nickerson testified as part of a successful lawsuit the Luceys brought against the Veteran's Administration for not having appropriate systems in place to respond to their son's crisis.

In deciding to write a book, Nickerson recognizes that he is on a parallel path in working to overcome his own vicarious trauma from this experience. The idea of sharing his own point of view dawned on him during a forum where he was introducing a panel on veterans' mental health. "Suddenly, I started to feel on an emotional level the depths of this story inside of me," he said. "I was not just a detached professional doing my job; I was a real person in a poignant drama of our times." He also realized that he is not the only therapist facing the tremendous job of healing our veterans.

During a writing retreat on Cape Cod last June, Nickerson's mind kept coming back to a question that still haunts him. "What's most gripping is trying to understand what Jeffrey must have experienced in Iraq that would have splintered him into different parts." An element of the drama imbued in Lucey's story is that he reported first to his sister and then to others, including Nickerson, that he followed an order to shoot and kill two unarmed Iraqi men.

The military disputes this claim, which was reported on extensively by several news outlets.

By almost any measure, such an incident would be considered a war crime. Nickerson believes it is true based on conversations with Lucey and others the young Marine talked to. "Perhaps the truth will never be known," states Nickerson, "but, clearly, something happened to Jeffrey and to debate exactly what misses the larger point of a combat veteran with PTSD."

Throughout his professional life Nickerson has been interested in what it means to be a man in our society. He knew he wanted to be a psychology major when he came to Wesleyan. His father, Ivan Nickerson '47, a Methodist minister, died soon after Nickerson arrived at the college that would become a shared alma mater. As he came to grips with this loss, he began to think deeply about male identity formation

Although an avid soccer player at

Wesleyan, Nickerson knew there was more to life than competition. "At Wesleyan I became involved with men's consciousness raising groups," said Nickerson. "The groups were an echo of the women's movement." A speaker who came to campus, Warren Farrell, prompted him to start thinking about cultural messages around masculinity. When Nickerson moved back to his native Western Massachusetts after graduate work at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, he pursued this interest by co-founding the Men's Resource Center for Change (MRC). He was the first chair of the board of directors, a position he recently reassumed. An important part of the organization's work centers on men who are violent, especially domestic batterers. The MRC created a court-certified program for men to examine and overcome violent tendencies.

In his own practice, Nickerson sees a wide spectrum of clients. "I've worked with many who have experienced major interpersonal trauma, but war trauma has a very different feel to it," he said. "Most civilian therapists don't really understand just how traumatizing war can be." Through Lucey's death it became increasingly clear to him that a country sending young people off to war must grapple with challenges of reintegrating traumatized individuals into society. "We can't just sit back and think we can divest ourselves from a society in which the military is involved," he said. "I want people to better understand the impacts of trauma and I want there to be a greater understanding of the hidden wounds of war."

The Lucey family said when Jeffrey enlisted as a reservist in 1999, before the 9/11 attacks, he didn't imagine he would be sent into combat. With the onset of war, reservists saw multiple deployments as part of an overextended military.

Since Lucey's death, Nickerson has learned that "there is a much greater vulnerability to PTSD among reservists than there is with the regular soldiers. They have less training, and less connection to the military culture, and when they come back from military duty, they are often released directly into civilian society. But, too often, a big part of them remains in combat."

Nickerson said Lucey resisted seeking mental health counseling from the military because he was afraid his illness might go

on his record and limit his options, such as pursuing a career in law enforcement. By the time he got to a civilian counselor his crisis had deepened to the point where "he couldn't see into the future and imagine a time when he would be okay," said Nickerson. "My first goal was to help him stabilize so he could have some sense of being able to observe what he was going through in a detached way." He explained the nature of PTSD to Lucey, pointing out that his symptoms were classic. "The sad truth is that I gave him the information but he wasn't at a place where he could fully integrate it... he was at the mercy of the churning seas of confusion inside of him."

A traumatic experience can overwhelm a person's ability to cope. "The individual can fluctuate radically from moments of

can't function in the present, rather than understanding that it is PTSD, you start to fully believe that you are incompetent or that you are permanently damaged," said Nickerson. He has come to think that underlying Lucey's suicide was a lurking belief that he was doing his family and his military unit a favor by "taking himself out." Nickerson saw a dichotomy in Lucey typical in males. "He was extremely vulnerable and yet having been trained to be a hero-type, he couldn't come to terms with the disparity. He clearly was troubled but was perhaps more disturbed that he might be troubling others. ... He was a bundle of needs and I think he hated that about himself."

"Many civilian therapists are just beginning to appreciate the prevalence and nature of war related PTSD", said

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overstimulation and anxiety to moments of complete shutdown and depression. Just when the person feels at rest, like while asleep, intrusive flashbacks force their way forward," said Nickerson. "When a person recalls a traumatic memory he or she often has a physiological reaction as well, like a tensing of muscles." A traumatized person often doesn't know where these sensations are coming from and attributes them to present circumstances. "The past becomes the present... they are no longer making decisions in terms of what's actually real," said Nickerson, "they experience a swirl of emotions, fragmented memories, and a lot of body sensations. Often substances are used to try to manage the feelings."

Lucey returned to school but panicked when he was not able to focus on his academic work. "When your life feels out of control and you begin to perceive that you

Nickerson, acknowledging his own learning curve. Knowing what to do about it is the next step. With the book, written for a broad audience, he feels compelled to tell Lucey's story at a level of detail that will help people understand lessons to be learned about the devastating impact of trauma on combat veterans and their families. "I tried to keep quiet, support the family, and then just move on to other things," said Nickerson, "but I found that I just couldn't let it go." He also believes the military should examine its recruiting, training and post-deployment practices. "The world needs to reflect much more deeply about what it means to actually send a young man or young woman off to war. In my case it came knocking on my door."

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