

For: Washington Post – Andrea Useem

David J. Kaplan is the President of a Real Estate Development Company in New York and is also the Founder and President of the Kaplan Public Service Foundation.

My brother Mitchell and I founded The Kaplan Public Service Foundation with the goal of encouraging American civilians to become more involved in the support of our Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines, and Coastguardsmen. Not an easy task as we find ourselves in two unpopular wars coupled with our worst economic downturn since the Great Depression.

The question we are most often asked is what motivated us, two attorneys in the real estate business, without military backgrounds, to become so passionate about supporting our troops? For me, the answer was Joseph Dow Covey, a former co-worker of mine, who quit his job on Wall Street to join the Army shortly after 9/11.

To show support for our friend, Mitchell and I sent Joe and his men numerous care-packages during his two tours of duty in Iraq. But it was an email, sent by Joe on New Year's Eve, 2008 that lead me to become much more involved than simply sending junk food and movies. His email was mostly factual; where his platoon was based, the Arabic nick-name given to him by the locals ("Mullazem Yusef", Arabic for "Lieutenant Joseph") and the various fire fights he and his men were involved in. While he discussed his hatred of the 15th month tours he and his platoon had to endure (I sent his email to every Congressman I could think of to have tours reduced to 12 months), I quickly picked up on the overwhelming sense of guilt throughout his correspondence. During a brief hospital visit Joe had to make to Kuwait, his former platoon, the 4th of the Black Sheep, was attacked by a suicide bomber. Seven soldiers, one quarter of his former men, were seriously injured in the attack. The worst of the injured, a soldier whom I will leave nameless, is now lying in a coma at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C.. Knowing Joe couldn't be there and sensing his terrible guilt for not being with these men at the time of the attack, I boarded a train to D.C. to visit the injured man. I knew my visit would mean a lot to Joe, but I didn't anticipate the impact the hospital visit would have on me.

What I saw at Walter Reed was numbing. The hospital, despite the media's negative portrayal at the time, was gorgeous. As I made my way up to the injured soldier's room, I must have passed at least five soldiers, both men and women, all with missing limbs. As I walked into the room of the injured soldier I had come to see, I was immediately struck by the devastation this injury had on both the soldier and his family. The soldier in front of me was barely 20 years old with a large portion of his head missing. At his bedside were his 19 year old wife and their beautiful newborn baby daughter. He couldn't speak, eat without the help of a feeding tube, or move most parts of his body. I introduced myself to his parents and wife who still appeared to be in a state of shock. All were deeply touched that their son's former platoon leader would have a friend visit in his place while he was still fighting in Iraq. I tried speaking a few encouraging words from Joe to the injured soldier, never knowing whether he heard or understood me. From that moment on, I knew I had to do anything I could to get American civilians more involved in their support for our troops and their families regardless of their personal positions on either war.

Today's public support of our war fighters is actually very high. Yet, actual civilian involvement furthering this support is literally zero. It's great to hear people say, "support our troops", but relatively few do anything to back up these words, unless they are a family member or close friend of someone serving. This isn't a result of the American public's lack of interest or care.

Quite the contrary; I believe it's mostly a factor of people not knowing how to help or even where to get started.

The easiest way to help out is to get the name and address of a serviceman or servicewoman in Iraq or Afghanistan and send them a care package. My brother and I have sent out almost 100 care packages these last three years mostly to people whom we have never met. Mitchell became so close with one unit in Afghanistan, that he actually played a very minor roll during a Taliban attack one winter's night. Hand warmers he had sent this unit kept their fingers warm when returning enemy fire. Unfortunately, the fire fight interrupted the showing of a movie Mitchell also sent as part of the same package. Something as simple as a \$25 care package filled with junk food, hand warmers and old DVD movies makes both you and these recipients feel great.

For those that really want to support our troops on a first hand basis, there is the Defense Orientation Council Association (DOCA), which runs 5 trips a year to American military bases throughout the world. There is also a great Defense Department civilian outreach program, the Joint Civilian Orientation Conference (JCOC). I would highly recommend both for those wishing not only a great experience but also a first hand look into what our Armed Forces are capable of doing.

Our organization, The Kaplan Public Service Foundation, has no staff and is much smaller than both DOCA and JCOC. We run one trip a year for approximately 25 to 35 civilians, with 40% of all registration fees going directly to military charities and the other 60% going to meals and transportation. Last summer with the help of both the Navy and Coast Guard, we ran our first trip to New England, where we spent our first morning on a Virginia Class fast attack submarine, and the afternoon at Surface Warfare Officers School Command (SWOS) and the Naval War College. We were the 1st large civilian group to have visited these schools in at least 2 years. According to the sailors we were with, no civilian group in their memory had ever asked before. The next day we spent the morning at the Coast Guard Academy in New London and the afternoon patrolling the waters off the coast of New Haven with Coast Guard. For me, the trip highlight was the reaction of an 18 year old high school senior named Jackson Floyd who was starting Dartmouth College in the fall. Jackson was participating on this trip with his father Chuck Floyd, the CFO of Hyatt Hotels and 30 other civilians. While visiting SWOS, Jackson said that his day with the Navy was the "best day of his life". Jackson is now a freshman on the Dartmouth College Football Team. With his influence, his football team got together last month and sent a \$200 care package to a group of soldiers in Afghanistan.

On April 21st and 22nd our Foundation we will be in Washington, D.C. at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, Andrews Air Force Base, Capitol Hill and The Marine Corps Barracks. I try to make our trips both educational and fun for the participants. But most importantly, I like to show our servicemen and servicewomen that civilians are not only paying attention and interested, but sincerely care about their wellbeing.

Today, less than 1 percent of all Americans are serving in the Armed Forces. The fact that these men and woman are now on their 3rd, 4th, or even 5th tours is nothing short of tragic. The toll it has taken on both them and their families is well documented. Ask yourself, what have we as Americans sacrificed over the last 9 years of war? Did our taxes increase to pay for these wars and the damage they have inflicted on our fellow citizens? We as civilians haven't been asked by our government to sacrifice much nor have we been inconvenienced in any way. My hope is to do everything in my limited power to reverse this trend.

