

On Thursday, May 7, 2009, at 1:00 PM a play was scheduled at Shoreline Community College in the "Quiet Dining Area" of our new Pagoda Union Building. The title of this play was "Into The Fire." It was advertised as a play about our returning veterans from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Vietnam. Since I had just been recently nominated to be a member of the college's Campus Veterans Education Team (CVET), I felt getting some perspective from listening to the stories of some of our veterans through this performance might be a good way to begin my quest to assist veterans in navigating the opportunities available to them at Shoreline Community College.

I have to confess that I was somewhat predisposed with how I would receive the message that was going to be communicated because college campuses have garnered reputations as not being "veteran-friendly." One of the first things I do when I attend a campus "event" is identify who amongst campus personnel is in attendance. I scanned the room and counted 1 administrator, 0 faculty, 7 classified staff members, and the rest were students or visitors.

The room had about 40 people in it.

What was immediately salient to me was the noticeable absence of faculty. It, unfortunately, was not surprising given that most college faculties in this country have cultivated a reputation for promoting an anti-war stance that includes non-support of veterans outside the classroom. That was a shame to me because they missed an opportunity that may never return. One thing is certain however, with the new Post 9/11 GI bill, veterans will be returning to college campuses throughout our nation in the next three to five years in great numbers. Faculty would be wise to prepare for that.

Before the play began there were introductions made by Lynette Peters, Director of the Women's Center at Shoreline Community College. What was also surprising to me was that this play was funded by the Women's Center! Evidently, the college's own Veteran Services budget is so small that it couldn't even fund this event! Needless to say, I was extremely grateful that the other student-centered organization, The Women's Center, stepped up to make this happen!

Then the performers, Tony Curry and Carrie Gibson, were introduced. They spoke of the use of language and how that may be offensive to some. Since there were no children in the audience it was appropriate to use adult language that might include cursing. Cursing is a constant with veterans acquired from our days in the military where cursing is taken to a different level of communication. They also talked about the opportunity to discuss our thoughts and emotions after the play and I was grateful to have that opportunity as well.

I had the pleasure of meeting both of them prior to the beginning of the event. They were very excited to be at the college and to share this new production. I was excited to meet them and looking forward to a great show. I was full of great expectations to say the least.

Then the play began.

From the opening line until the last word was spoken I was in a whirlwind of emotion that rose from me like a Santa Ana dust devil that appears out of nowhere. I went from crying to laughing, from anger to joy, from tension to relief, from shock and awe to "been there, done that", all in a matter of approximately 60 minutes of listening to the stories taken from the experiences of men and women who have put their own lives on the line for all of us despite the political decisions that got us involved in the first place. Tony and Carrie had captured the past 22 years of my own struggles with being a veteran by sharing their experiences interviewing veterans and portraying their stories through their dramatic presentation, "Into The Fire," with such precision, professionalism, and power!

After the play was completed we were offered the opportunity to "de-brief" so to speak. This was most welcome because I personally needed a "cool-down" period to allow me the opportunity to collect my thoughts and emotions about what I had just seen and heard. The discussion was

informative and thought-provoking in a manner that was most respectful to the diversity of opinion in the room.

If you are involved in helping veterans on a college campus, this is mandatory viewing! This play should be required material for anyone involved in the process of helping veterans acquire their educational pursuits by using the benefits available to them in the Post 9/11 GI Bill.

Tony and Carrie's performance transcended age, gender, political persuasion, even one's individual opinion on war and are able to quantify the veteran's message on the most basic level, that of being a human being. Human beings who have chosen to serve the great experiment we call The United States of America. See "Into The Fire" for yourself. Bring veterans, their family members above the age of 17 (think "R" rating), and those who feel that by supporting veterans helps to support war. Their lives and yours will be changed forever just by spending 60 minutes to listen and understand their stories!

Thomas Kirwin Prigmore  
Veteran  
United States Air Force  
1983-1987