

A Savior For Those Who Save Lives in War

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Tammy Alvarez, 68 and not yet anesthetized to the sorrows or glories of the world, walked into her Rockville living room one day five years ago and told her husband she was going to have a movie made, one that could help save a university they both cared about.

"And he just looked at me, you know," she clucks now, a week away from the premiere of the film, "Fighting for Life."

Since 1986 her husband, Everett Alvarez Jr. -- who was one of the longest-held prisoners of war in North Vietnam -- has served on the board of directors of the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences, a Bethesda school that trains military medical personnel.

Time and again USU had been threatened with funding cuts that could have closed its doors. "I saw so much in this school. . . . They're not about war, they're about saving their fellow man. They put themselves in harm's way to serve others," Alvarez says, her voice cracking with emotion. "They" includes her son Bryan Alvarez, who trained to be a doctor at USU and is finishing his second tour in Iraq. "I was so upset that anyone would want to close it. If the public knew what was going on behind these walls, there would be an outcry."

Alvarez called Academy Award-winning director Terry Sanders, whose previous documentary, "Return With Honor," had zoomed in on the lives of Everett Alvarez and other Vietnam POWs. For two months there was no response. Then suddenly Sanders was on the phone, saying he wanted to hear more.

Sanders visited the university and was "immediately struck by [the thought] 'This is a wonderful school,' " he remembers. He agreed to make a film, one that would explore the traditions and the inner sanctums of "the West Point of military medicine."

Once Sanders signed on, Alvarez -- a former stay-at-home mom who had no fundraising experience -- set out to raise the money. She knocked on the doors of every corporation and personal donor she could reach. The documentary's initial budget was \$1 million; the ultimate expenses nearly doubled that. "I think it got to the point that no one wanted to be near me. No matter where I went -- a party, people's houses, even the beauty shop -- I would ask," says Alvarez, who with her husband donated close to \$100,000 to the project. "I'm glad this worked out . . . because I was losing friends."

Meanwhile, Sanders began filming in 2005, just as the war in Iraq was hitting a new level of chaos and bloodshed. The military allowed Sanders's team of filmmakers incredible access to the makeshift hospitals, emergency surgeries and moments of tragedy and relief that defined the existence of U.S. medics on a foreign battlefield.

"The war tipped it into this odyssey of military medicine," Sanders says. "It became more than just the face of war, than the doctors and nurses. It really became very intimate with the wounded."

To that end, a portion of the movie follows the saga of Crystal Davis, an Army specialist who lost a leg in Iraq and wills her way through recovery at Walter Reed Army Medical Center.

Alvarez expects some viewers to be surprised by the mere existence of this little university in Bethesda. She hopes that by the time the lights come up, they'll also be thankful for it and for the medical professionals serving their country at a time of war.

"They're the ones who hold these wounded young kids -- 18, 19 years old -- in their arms as they're crying out for their mothers. Do you know how hard that is?" she asks. "And they need us."