

Rebuilding America's warriors

Shirley Brenon, Special to The Desert Sun 3:02 p.m. PST March 12, 2016



(Photo: Murray Ross/Special to The Desert Sun)

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The event at Hyatt Regency Hotel in Indian Wells was filled with caring, sharing and patriotism as The Iraq Star Foundation, better known as Rebuilding America's Warriors (RAW) honored **Bryan Anderson**, who lost both legs and his left hand in combat. RAW founder and president **Maggie Lockridge** said, "Brian has managed to overcome his extreme physical challenges to enlighten and inspire other amputees. He travels the country giving inspirational speeches to others facing adversity."

Guests mingled with the warriors and celebrities at an outdoor reception, followed by a silent auction and outstanding dinner. In the ballroom, **Father Howard Lincoln** gave the blessing, the 29 Palms color guard presented the colors, **Lauren Carse** sang the National Anthem and **Sarah Hagar** sang "God Bless the USA."

Dodger first baseman and RAW board member **Ron Fairley** emceed, welcoming the 300 guests by saying, "Whatever will make a warrior feel better about himself, we will do."

Then he introduced special guests including, Riverside County Supervisor **John Benoit**, **Bill Montgomery**, **Johnny Bench**, **Doug Flynn**, **Loni Anderson** and **Diedre Hall**. Also Lt. Col. **Danny McKnight**, **Dr. David Wilhite**.



Ron Fairly, Maggie Lockridge, Dr. Norman Leaf and Ryan Goede (Photo: Murray Ross/Special to The Desert Sun)

President Lockridge introduced each warrior present, giving a brief history of each, but as she finished, Triple Purple Heart recipient **Ryan Goede** felt so emotional that he ran up to the microphone and said, “We all have unique stories, but we have something in common. Each warrior here has a smile on his face because of what you’ve done for us. Thanks for saving my life and all these warriors lives.”

Honoree Anderson was then introduced and said, “If you choose things to be bad, they will be. I retired at 26, but I have a very rewarding life and I can help other soldiers to live. Soldiers get their dignity back when they are helped.”

HEARTFELT WORDS FROM OTHER WARRIORS:

Jose Navarro, present with his mother **Liz Chavez**, (who was by his bed side during seven surgeries and five years in the hospital) said, “This organization gave me my life back. Once I was just pills and tubes but now I am going to college and am mentoring other wounded soldiers. I am the lucky one. Many of my injured and disfigured friends didn’t get help and committed suicide.”

Norbie Lara was in Walter Reed for two years with lung damage and had to learn to walk and talk again. He said, “Last year Maggie found me a surgeon who performed abdominal reconstruction surgery, which the Veteran’s Affairs had turned down, and it saved my life.”

Iraq Star was conceived in 2007 when Lockridge saw a documentary about journalist Bob Woodruff who was injured by an IED. She was concerned about him and other problems at Walter Reed Hospital. Having owned an aftercare facility in Beverly Hills, she wrote to 30 of her favorite plastic and reconstructive surgeons and **Dr. Norman Leaf**, who responded immediately, became Director of the Iraq Foundation.



Honoree Bryan Anderson talks to the audience. (Photo: Murray Ross/Special to The Desert Sun)

Today they provide free reconstructive surgery to America's wounded and disfigured Veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. The group is comprised of 370 Board Certified Surgeons and dentists in 49 states. They coordinate doctors, surgeons and the facilities required to operate, plus medical supplies, transportation and accommodations at no charge to the soldier. In 2014 alone, RAW provided over 400 reconstructive procedures to America's wounded.

Other board members present included, vice president **Micaela Bensko**, **Lt. Gen. Earl Hailstone** and warrior advocate **Ali Henry**. Dr. Phil McCraw and Robin McGraw are honorary board members.

A fabulous evening only got better as The Gatlin Brothers ended the evening by singing the National Anthem followed by plenty of great harmony and guitar picking.

Information: IraqStarFoundation.org or infoforRAW@aol.com or call 760 568-4039.