

OCEANSIDE: Wounded soldier returns to middle school

Madison alum seeks to inspire younger students

By **STACY BRANDT** - sbrandt@nctimes.com | Posted: Tuesday, January 19, 2010 5:55 pm

A wounded soldier and former student at Madison Middle School in Oceanside appeared on the school's morning news program Tuesday to encourage students to look past obstacles and enjoy life.

Joey Paulk was severely injured in 2007 when the vehicle he was riding in hit a roadside bomb in Afghanistan. He lost all of his fingers and had third-degree burns on 40 percent of his body.

Despite the seriousness of his wounds, Paulk told the students Thursday that he has managed to remain upbeat by focusing on the positive things in his life.

"If I can inspire people to keep one foot ahead and to move forward and move past any hardship," he said. "That's what I try to get through to people when I talk to them."

Some of the students involved with the broadcast said they were inspired by Paulk's message.

"He's like a hero from our school," said Aubrey Gardin, an eighth-grader at the school. "He made a difference in the world."

The 24-year-old Paulk attended Madison a decade ago and graduated from Rancho Buena Vista High School. Both campuses are part of the Vista Unified School District.

He said he developed a bond with teachers at Madison when he was there and started returning to visit the school when he was at RBV and continuing through his military service.

"It means a lot to the students and the teachers," Principal Robert Pack said. "They see him as an inspiration to keep trying and keep going."

This was the first time Paulk appeared on the television broadcast, which reached students in all of the school's classrooms.

The reactions he gets from the students have inspired him to continue coming back, he said. Now, he's even considering starting to visit other schools to encourage students to make the most of their lives.

"Life is short," he said. "Don't take it for granted."

Paulk joined the Army shortly after graduating from Rancho Buena Vista in 2003. After three years in training and as a military police officer, he was sent to southern Afghanistan on Valentine's Day in 2007. It was five months later that an improvised explosive device ignited the Humvee he and other soldiers were in. After the blast, he went back into the blaze to save a friend who was trapped.

When he woke up from a medically induced coma three months later, his vocal chords were paralyzed, his fingers missing, he had lost more than 50 pounds and he had severe burns on nearly half of his body.

Not only can he walk and talk now, but he can also drive a car and even play football, he said.

"There's not much I can't do now," he said.

Someday, he said he hopes to recover enough to pursue his lifelong goal of becoming a police officer.

As for the whole hero thing, he said he doesn't consider himself one.

"I was just doing my job," Paulk said.

Still, he said it feels good to get the recognition for the work he has done and the sacrifices he has made.

"I soak it in," he said. "It's cool to be appreciated."

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