
“Because of (Wyakin Warriors Foundation’s) support, I was able to put my boots back on and go to class.”

— James Nealey

Blind 28-year-old veteran from Nampa who suffers from a hereditary degenerative disease

Disabled Iraq vets transition into CWI

Non-profit organization offers scholarships and mentoring

By NATE GREEN

ngreen@idahopress.com

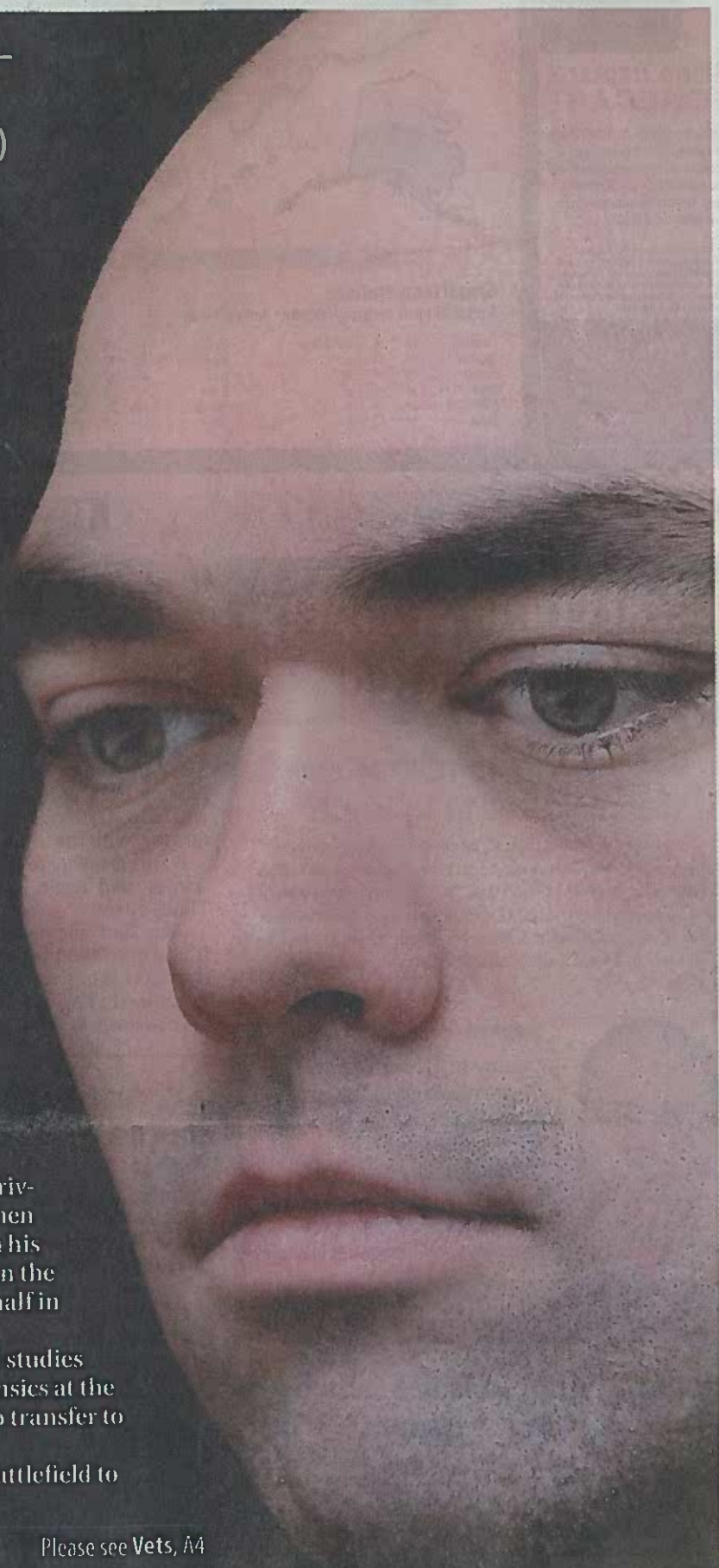
© 2012 Idaho Press-Tribune

NAMPA — James Donaldson was driving a Humvee in Iraq July 15, 2005, when an improvised explosive tore through his vehicle. Donaldson lost both his legs in the attack and spent the next year and a half in the hospital.

Now the 27-year-old from Caldwell studies information security and digital forensics at the College of Western Idaho and plans to transfer to Boise State University this summer.

But Donaldson’s transition from battlefield to classroom has not been easy.

Please see Vets, A4





James Nealey, (above), a 28-year-old from Nampa, served in Iraq with the Air Force and now studies business at the College of Western Idaho. Nealey, who went blind from a hereditary degenerative disease, was one of the original five "pathfinders" inducted into the Wyakin Warriors. He plans to pursue his MBA and start his own business.

James Donaldson, (left), a 27-year-old from Caldwell, served in Iraq with the Army and now studies information security and digital forensics at the College of Western Idaho. Donaldson, who lost both his legs to an improvised explosive device, will be inducted into the Wyakin Warriors in June. He plans to transfer into Boise State University and earn his bachelor's degree.

The Wyakin Warrior Foundation,

a non-profit organization started by Boiseans Jeff and Rebecca Bacon, provides wounded veterans with a full four-year scholarship — including room, board and tuition — along with job training, mentoring, and life-time membership in the organization. The first group of five veterans was inducted into the program last August. Five more will be inducted in June.

Photos by Adam Eschbach/IPT

Vets

Continued from A1

Though he has learned to accept the stares of his fellow students — and make them feel at ease by joking about his injuries — Donaldson struggles with anxiety. He's nervous in large crowds and tries to keep his back to the wall in class; he hasn't had a good night's sleep since he returned home.

Donaldson was recently accepted into the Wyakin Warriors Foundation, a non-profit organization that helps injured veterans attend college and find jobs — while providing a support network of mentor veterans.

"It's really nice to have somebody who knows what we're going through," Donaldson said.

Roy Ledesma, program director for the Wyakin Warriors Foundation, explained that veterans like Donaldson face more challenges that traditional college students — and the government doesn't always provide the help they need. Many have physical and emotional scars sustained from battle, and they often find it difficult to function outside the highly structured military life.

"The support network is designed to be more like a military chain of command.



Adam Eschbach / IPT

Roy Ledesma is the program director for the Wyakin Warrior Foundation. The program is to help veterans with severe disabilities return to college.

It puts them in their comfort zone and helps with the transition," Ledesma said.

James Nealey, a 28-year-old Army veteran from Nampa who began losing his sight after returning from Iraq, was one of the first five veterans inducted into the Wyakin Warriors program August 2011. An upbeat man who plans to pursue a master's degree in business, Nealey said he sometimes struggles emotionally.

Earlier this week, he had an especially bad day — and several mentors called him and gave him a pep talk.

"I had a mental stress breakdown. Because of their support, I was able to put my boots back on and go to class," Nealey said.

Tom Byrns, a former Army Major who served as a tank company commander in Iraq, directs the scholarships and education program for the Wyakin Warriors Foundation. Byrns has personally suffered post-traumatic stress disorder and severe depression from his battle experiences — and he understands the needs of the student veterans.

"We all have our personal

demons. It's important to identify those things that trigger potential issues," he said.

Byrns noted that while veterans face challenges, they also have a lot to offer. They tend to be disciplined and hardworking, and unlike traditional students, they have experience outside of the academic environment.

"They bring diversity, they bring life experience, and they bring a perspective on what's important and what's not important," he said.