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Kinard gets hero's welcome in return to Spartanburg

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Katherine Gouch, Harry Kinard and Andrew Kinard listen to the National Anthem during a homecoming event in Andrew's honor at First Baptist Church in Spartanburg Saturday. Several thousand people, below, came out to welcome Andrew home.

What defines a hero? A long line of dignitaries stood on stage Saturday in the back parking lot of

First Baptist Church and praised the heroic efforts and example of Marine 1st Lt. Andrew Kinard, a Spartanburg native who lost both of his legs and suffered a laundry list of other severe injuries on Oct. 29, 2006, in Iraq.

They talked about the six others from this county who have gone to war in recent years and not come home - and other servicemen and women who have been injured. They called Andrew "Spartanburg's hero" and "America's best." They called him "an inspiration." They read letters from people in his life who noticed his leadership skills at an early age. And they thanked him for his service. He was given a biker jacket, copies of resolutions passed in his honor and a flag flown over the U.S. Capitol.

And then, flanked by his father on one side and youth minister on the other, Andrew, 24, stood on two titanium and plastic prosthetic legs, put his arms firmly on the podium and looked out into a sea of nearly 4,000 people, many of them waving flags.

They'd come to see him, to hear him, to thank him - even though most had never met him.

It was as if you could see their reflection in his eyes.

"There's been talk of heroes today, and heroism - what we think of it, how we define it, who we look at as heroes. I see a lot of heroes out here. I see a whole lot of heroes," Andrew said, after taking a moment to soak in the overwhelming outpouring of support and patriotism.

"I see these gentlemen, and some of these ladies, sporting their Marine Corps League and other veterans organizations' covers, uniforms. The law enforcement officials here today, I can't thank you enough for your heroic efforts in serving our nation - because that's what it's all about. It's about serving something greater than yourself. And sacrifice."

'My turf'

Andrew, a Dorman High School graduate, was last in Spartanburg for a few days before his unit deployed for Iraq in September 2006.

About six weeks in, he and his men were camped out near Rawah, in the tumultuous al Anbar province in the western part of the country. They got a call from local Iraqi policemen about fighting that had broken out among nearby tribesmen. They dispersed it, angering some of the people there.

"No one fights on my turf," Andrew recounted. "Not unless I let them do it."

That night, the Rawah area received its first rain of the season - important because it would mask the signs of digging necessary to plant improvised explosive devices, more commonly called roadside bombs.

The next morning, Andrew took some men out on a patrol of the area. He was standing directly on top of a 155 mm artillery shell when it was detonated.

On Saturday, Andrew thanked those men - most of them now are at Camp Lejeune, N.C., gearing up for another deployment - for their bravery and pointed out that the patrol's Navy corpsman passed out on top of him five times because of a concussion as he patched up Andrew enough to be transported.

The days after the blast took Andrew to several medical facilities - he went into cardiac arrest multiple times and, immediately following the explosion, was issued 67 units of blood - before eventually arriving at the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Md. One of his nurses there, Ensign Rachel Engler, doubled as a Washington Redskins cheerleader and in the following weeks got him a picture of the squad to put up in his room.

Back home, the Kinard family tried to piece together what happened to their oldest son with each phone call. Before long, they were in Maryland with him - even though Andrew wouldn't become fully coherent until around the end of November.

A few days after the first call, former Dorman principal Darryl Owens stopped by the Kinard home in Converse Heights to find out what he could about Andrew.

"Darryl, I really look forward to the day Andrew can come back and all of his buddies can be lined up on Plume Street, welcoming him home," his father, Harry Kinard remembers saying.

Saturday, the houses along Plume Street boasted red, white and blue balloons, and many of them displayed American flags.

But the welcome would be much, much larger.

'The same person'

Andrew has spent the past several months going through "grueling" occupational and physical therapy at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C.

He arrived in Spartanburg at the downtown airport at about 11:30 a.m. Saturday.

Two seniors from the U.S. Naval Academy - there, they're called "midshipmen first class" - Spartanburg Mayor Bill Barnet and several family members waited along a red carpet in a private hangar for Andrew to touch down in his hometown. Harry Kinard had flown to Washington early Saturday to ride down with his son.

"It's been a long time, but I could tell he was the same person, which was good to see," said Jordan White, an academy senior. "Even through something so horrible, he's the same."

Kyle Durrant, who also came from Maryland, added that Andrew was the first person the two had known personally to be so severely injured in the line of duty. Andrew was Durrant and White's squad leader during their freshman, or plebe, year at the Naval Academy.

Andrew arrived out of uniform, not wanting it to get wrinkled during the flight. Marines are like that, they say.

He shook hands and hugged everyone as he made his way down the carpet. The Rev. Seth Buckley, minister to students at First Baptist, pointed out the gray T-shirts a few people wore. On one side, they stated, "Always Faithful" - with the Marine Corps motto, "Semper Fi," underneath - and on the back, "Welcome Home Andrew Kinard, October 27, 2007."

"You're going to see a lot of them today, buddy," Buckley told him. After a long week - Buckley was

one of the primary organizers of Saturday's homecoming, and helped hand out hundreds of those T-shirts - he was practically glowing.

Not far away, the crowd had begun to descend on First Baptist.

'One of the coolest experiences of my life'

Converse Street was blocked off for Andrew's arrival, with 400-plus motorcycles from the Patriot Guard Riders lined along either side. The Patriot Guard furnished a smaller contingent to be a part of the motorcade from the airport to the church.

One of the riders, 57-year-old Mitchell Elliott of Locust, N.C., said he was there to "pay my respects to a hero." He'd never met Andrew, but followed his story.

"I've been to many funerals where I didn't know the person," Elliott said.

He paused briefly, gesturing up and down Converse Street, before adding, "I have a son in the military. This isn't for the war. This is to support the troops."

The motorcade consisted of Spartanburg Public Safety officers, a convertible for Andrew and his parents and two Hummer limousines for the dignitaries.

The Hummers were supposed to be soundproof. But when the motorcade arrived, hundreds of bikers started their engines, and even those inside the limousines could feel Converse Street rumble. Andrew later called it "one of the coolest experiences of my life."

Before they arrived, local Boy Scouts handed out American flags. Little boys and girls held "Welcome Home" signs.

The scene was more reminiscent of the ticker-tape parades for returning World War II troops than the foul mood that greeted many veterans coming back from Vietnam. More than one person, including Andrew, noted the importance of that.

"The people in this area are very loyal," said Barbara Ferguson of Spartanburg, who had never met the returning Marine, either. "I just think they would do this - not just to support Andrew, but to support all the troops."

'A prayer of success'

After much fanfare Saturday, the homecoming kicked off. A giant American flag formed the backdrop.

Mayor Barnet praised the Kinards for showing this city "how a family under duress can come together."

"Andrew has played an important role in our lives, not only because he came home, but because of the way he handled himself - his poise, his focus, his faith, his belief in his God and his belief in his country," Barnet said. "He has given each of us a model that we all should share."

County Councilman David Britt proclaimed Oct. 27 as "Andrew Kinard Day."

"Everybody that knows Andrew knows that he's very humble, very determined, courageous," Britt said. "But today, Andrew, we're not just celebrating what you've done in the last year, but we're celebrating what you're going to do during the rest of your life - and it's going to be great things."

Gov. Mark Sanford pointed out that "our lives, at the end of the day, will be defined by our faiths and by what we do."

"What he reminds us of is that life is fragile. It's precious. It's fleeting. Anyone who has walked foot patrol in Iraq knows that," Sanford said. "But we all know that. The part that we don't know is, what will we do with the life that we do have? You are an inspiration for the way that you're living life, and for the way that you challenge every one of us ... for the way that we will choose to live our lives."

Mike Flanagan, Andrew's rugby coach at the Naval Academy, said the Marine's jersey would be retired this year and that "it will be in good hands" with Andrew.

"When I first got here and saw the flags and heard the music, I didn't think I was going to get through it without crying," Flanagan said later. "The community support is fantastic. Spartanburg definitely did itself proud."

U.S. Rep. Bob Inglis framed his speech around the 20th Psalm, and pointed out that Andrew came from a family that afforded him many opportunities - but chose to serve in the Marine Corps. Inglis, his voice wavering on the brink of tears, said that when he and the Kinards prayed that psalm months ago, it was a "prayer of desperation." Today, he said, "it is a prayer of success."

"Andrew has processed this at a very deep, spiritual level," Inglis said. "He's aware of what he's lost. But he's also aware of what God has ahead of him."

'Always faithful'

The crowd gave its first standing ovation when Harry Kinard was introduced.

"That seemed very fitting," Andrew later said. "My father is my greatest hero - just the man of character that he is, and who he is, and what he represents. When I was in and out of the operating room, over at Bethesda ... my father was the last person I saw when I went into surgery, and the first person I saw when I came out. And, to me, his physical presence - letting me know it was going to be OK - that meant more to me."

Harry Kinard, a urologist, said that the two words always faithful "really characterize our experience as a family this past year, simply because so many people have been faithful."

"Knowing what I know about Andrew's situation from a medical perspective ... I know that there is absolutely no way that Andrew could be here today without God's willful and intentional intervention," Harry Kinard said. "And we're thankful for that."

Overcoming adversity

When it was Andrew's turn to speak, he kept the crowd laughing, tugging on their heartstrings and using his story to illustrate how dogged determination could help anyone through adversity.

When he spoke, Engler - the nurse from Bethesda, now a lieutenant junior grade and his girlfriend - hung on to every word, her nervousness of visiting Spartanburg for the first time and meeting people from Andrew's past totally gone.

"It's not easy being in a position I've been in - going off to war, getting blown up and having my body shattered," Andrew told the crowd.

"The difficult part of that was when I was lying in my bed late at night, thinking, 'Am I ever going to be accepted again? Are people going to be interested in what I have to say? Are they going to treat me as something different? I thought about how I would have reacted to someone before I was injured: Maybe, expressing gratitude for their service, but then, 'Have a nice day.' And so, the whole expression of what y'all have done out here for me means so much, because I understand and I know that this community ... (is) all behind me and supporting me, and for that, I cannot thank you enough."

He added that lessons he learned on the rugby field - no matter how many times you're hit, you get back up - have helped keep him going.

'A real hero'

Andrew said images of Saturday's homecoming will help him push through his upcoming rounds of physical therapy.

"Despite the fact that half my body is missing, that I lost my legs almost completely, the most important thing to me is not what I lost. That's not what defines me. What defines me is what I still have. And for that, I'm thankful," he said. "So much of life is about the attitude that we have. Our attitude is what defines us - it's the outlook that we have that influences the decisions that we make. Attitude is so important. It's the one thing we have control over."

Later, Andrew said that losing his legs had changed his perspective on life - adding, with a laugh, that the first things he used to notice about people were their eyes and their smile, and now, in a wheelchair, it's their shoes.

Andrew almost wasn't able to wear his legs Saturday, as he was unable to practice walking for more than eight weeks because of abdominal surgery this summer.

Still an active-duty Marine, he reports back to Walter Reed later this week. Andrew has at least nine to 12 more months of physical therapy ahead of him. He hasn't decided if he'll retire from the military after that.

Andrew's sister, Katherine Gouch, introduced him on Saturday.

Gouch has spent much of the past year keeping an online journal about her brother's progress.

A decidedly tough-looking biker burst into tears as she gave her short monologue.

"Andrew resonates with us as a hero because he puts himself last. Not first," she said. "He chose to put himself in harm's way when he didn't have to. And when he faced the reality of certain dreams shattered, with the loss of his legs, he stood up and said, 'This does not define me.' Andrew teaches us that we're more than just our physical bodies. That true joy comes not in our circumstances, but in God alone."

"He is a real hero."

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