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Headlines

July 17, 2006

A promise, a home, a future

By CARY LEIDER VOGRIN THE GAZETTE

The Iraqi teenager nicknamed Steve-O by the Fort Carson troops he helped has no doubt where he'd be if he were still in his home country: "Dead," he said matter-of-factly.

Today, nearly two years after arriving in the United States, Steve-O is adjusting to American life but still grieves for the family he gave up when he helped the soldiers root out about 40 insurgents — one of them his own father.



It took six months, but 1st Sgt. Daniel Hendrex made good on his promise to get Steve-O, right, out of Iraq. (COURTESY DANIEL HENDREX)

"The most thing I miss is my family," he said recently. "It's hard, but it's better than dying."

Soldiers in Fort Carson's Dragon Company first encountered Steve-O and his incredible claims in December 2003.

They were understandably suspicious when the boy, then a skinny 13-year-old, walked up to a checkpoint in the town of Husaybah near the Syrian border and told them he had information about an insurgent cell. His father was among the leaders, he said, and he, too, was being forced to fight.

Knowing what he was saying could get him killed by his own people, he insisted the soldiers act like they were arresting him and take him into custody.

"I was incredibly wary of him, said First Sgt. Daniel Hendrex, the soldier instrumental in bringing Steve-O to the United States and who chronicled the relationship between the boy and Dragon Company in a recently published book titled "A Soldier's Promise."

More on this topic

BOOK-SIGNING

Daniel Hendrex will sign copies of "A Soldier's Promise — The Heroic True Story of an American Soldier"

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Steve-O's information, though, proved genuine, and the soldiers protected him. For the next few months, he lived with them, went on patrol with them, identified insurgents, pointed out where weapons were hidden.

"He was by far the smartest informant we ever had come in," said Hendrex, whose skepticism about the boy evolved into deep affection. "It really started becoming personal when you saw how much he was giving up with his family, his tribe and his country."

It was Hendrex who told Steve-O that his mother had been shot because the boy had helped the Americans.

"That was for me when the paternal instinct kicked in, and I realized this kid has given up everything to help our unit," Hendrex said. "That was the turning point for me when I started to focus on getting him out of the region and out of Iraq."

In March 2004, Dragon Company's tour was up. Hendrex hugged the boy, who was being left in the care of the Marines, and promised he'd get him out of Iraq.

Six months and reams of red tape later, that promise was fulfilled. Steve-O arrived in Colorado Springs late one night in September 2004. The next morning, Hendrex drove the boy and an interpreter to the top of Pikes Peak. Hendrex remembered how moved he had been the first time he set foot on the summit, and he wanted Steve-O to start his new life with a view from atop America's Mountain.

Steve-O settled in with Hendrex and his wife, Christina, who was expecting the couple's first child. The couple hired a tutor for the teen, who, as the oldest of six children, had been taken out of school in the third grade to help support his family.

But when Hendrex was redeployed to Iraq in February 2005, it became clear Steve-O would be better off with a two-parent family. Coming from a male-dominated culture, he had difficulty in a house run by a woman. The boy also was extremely fearful that Hendrex would not come home alive. A psychologist recommended he live elsewhere, with a family with no connections to the military.

"That was a very tough time," Hendrex said. "To have to leave that situation — to leave Christina with a brandnew baby, to leave this Iraqi boy in our home who was just devastated."

"You had this vision of how you want this to work out, and when I had to go back to Iraq, it really was tough to hear that things weren't going well," Hendrex said.

The Gazette is not identifying Steve-O's location for his safety and to protect the privacy of his foster family.

Steve-O, now 16, said he is

and an Iraqi Boy" at 7 p.m. Wednesday at Barnes & Noble, 795 Citadel Drive East in Colorado Springs. Hendrex is stationed at Fort Carson.

An excerpt:
 "I felt miserable leaving Steve-O behind. He'd lived up to his promises. I'd failed to live up to mine.... Every first sergeant focuses on bringing his soldiers home. Steve-O had become a valuable part of Dragon Company: He'd helped to define us and our mission; he'd given us our only hope that we might be accomplishing something through all of our sacrifices; he had helped us see the human side of Iraq and the suffering of innocent people in it. In return, he'd lost his family. We were his family now; the men of Dragon Company were his new family. And there we were, abandoning him. I was leaving a man behind — something I had vowed that I would never do."

happy at his new home and in school. "They're great," he said of his family. "I like them. It's getting better a lot.

"I love football. I play fullback, nose tackle. I'm big — I got 10 sacks in one game. Because I'm fast I can go get the ball."

English is his hardest subject in school, he said. "It's easy to speak it, but it's hard to write and read it. I'm a teenager, and I like to do teenager stuff and it keep me away from studying. I try my best."

Hendrex, 37, talks with Steve-O or e-mails him every week or so. He said the boy is becoming more like a typical American teen each day. He said Steve-O complained about having to give up his cell phone, which he earned through a summer job, when he recently went to camp.

Steve-O has been in counseling for more than a year to help him adjust to American culture and to deal with the loss of his family, Hendrex said.

His siblings are reportedly in Fallujah, and his mother is believed to be dead. His father, whom Hendrex testified against during his second deployment, was last known to be in jail.

Hendrex said it's unlikely the boy will ever be reunited with his siblings.

"They probably want nothing to do with Steve-O if not to kill him. His younger sister is already married. They are very much still in the heart of insurgency, and if they are still in that atmosphere, they will always hold him responsible for his father," he said.

Steve-O hopes to become a U.S. citizen, and he was granted political asylum last year.

He feels he did the right thing by helping the U.S. soldiers.

"I'm happy with my choice. If I'm wrong, I hope God forgives me, and if I'm right, I hope God will help me."

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