

Braving the Grief

By HOWARD V. SANN

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On July 26, 2003, Spc. Wilfredo Perez Jr. of Norwalk became the third serviceman from Connecticut to die in Iraq. The past two years have been a journey in braving grief for Perez's father and the rest of the Perez family, as chronicled here by Wilfredo Perez's brother-in-law.

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"My son," the father says, "pops into my dreams once a week." In a recent dream, the son was talking to the father when he suddenly said, "Dad, I gotta go now. I'll see you in three years," then disappeared.

But when the father wakes, he wakes knowing that his 24-year-old-son won't be coming back.

Wilfredo Perez Jr., or Junior, as he was called, was guarding a hospital in Iraq in a town no one here had ever heard of when he was killed in a grenade blast. The father, Wilfredo Perez Sr., has known this too long already. July 26 will be two years, but it's always yesterday. That Army wake-up call - on Sunday, July 27, 2003, at 6 a.m., 19 hours after Junior's death - catapulting the father from deep sleep into deep nightmare. Nothing's been the same since.

Then, Perez remembered that the day before and the day he was killed, the young man's Army photograph, taped to a wall of photos in Perez's basement office, kept falling off. On Friday, Perez had found it on his desk and put it back up. On Saturday afternoon, when he turned on the light, it was on his desk - fallen again - and he put it back up yet again.

Junior was killed on Saturday about 11 a.m. in Iraq.

Every day Perez, 45, wakes to this loss of his son. And every day he does what he can to make sure his son's death in Iraq isn't the end of the story. Keeping alive his son's memory has become the father's work, his mission.

"Junior gave his life," his father says, implying that this is the least he can do, that it's part of his continuing responsibility as a parent. This from a man who never knew his own father, who had walked out when he was a young boy.

"Junior and I were inseparable," Perez says. "We rode motorcycles together. I'd wake Junior at 3 in the morning and we'd sneak out of the house in our socks, put our boots on in the garage. It was the best time. The streets were deserted. It was just us. Side by side."

Now, wherever Perez goes, he's reminded of his son. Those last few years, Junior worked with his dad. The father taught the son. Together they ripped out and rebuilt countless kitchens and additions. "We were inseparable," Perez says again.

Now, some days are harder than others. Winters, the hardest. Especially that first one. Snow. "Junior came out with me on the plow. There was a lot of snow in Connecticut back then," the father says. "Lots of mornings opening up driveways. Finishing the night at Dunkin' Donuts."

Alone in the snow-framed night, plowing by himself, he feels Junior with him.

By now, Perez has been through all the firsts: first recognition from American Legion Post 12 in Norwalk (even before Junior was back), first Memorial Day, first Veterans Day, Junior's birthday, and the first anniversary of Junior's death. About a year in, at the 2004 Greater Norwalk Chamber of Commerce annual dinner, Perez was introduced as the father of a soldier killed in Iraq to a Navy officer who'd lost a son in war. "He told me right off, 'This is only going to get harder with time.' It knocked me back. He caught me off guard. At first, I didn't like what he said, but I quickly realized that what he'd told me was the truth. ... He was right."

Born in East New York, Brooklyn, on Dec. 19, 1978, Junior grew up in Queens in a row house on Cornelia Street in Ridgewood, N.Y., with his mother, Ann Marie Eccles, older sister Lisa Marie and grandmother, Terry Eccles. His parents split up when he and his sister were toddlers, but Perez, who moved to Connecticut, remained in their lives.

Junior became "the man of the house" at an early age, helping take care of his elderly great aunt, an invalid confined to a wheelchair. He also took his dad's mother, Herminia Roman-Perez, shopping and everywhere else, but mostly to the casino. In 1991, in fifth grade, Junior, then 13, marched with the Sea Cadets in the ticker-tape parade in New York City celebrating the Persian Gulf War victory. That same year, he started getting into trouble, his grades weren't good. "He wasn't at school half the time," his father said. "I went to him and asked him if he wanted to come live with me, go to school in Norwalk. He said he did. 'Now I have to talk your mother into it,'" Perez told Junior.

She didn't need convincing. Perez remembers the conversation. In the hallway. He said: "I told Ann Marie that I'd straighten him out. I told her that if Junior ever wants to come back, I'll let him come back."

Junior moved in with his father and Perez's longtime girlfriend, Victoria Roos, in Norwalk over that summer. In 1992, he started sixth grade at Nathan Hale Middle School, was promoted in 1994, and went to Norwalk High School. There he gravitated to peer counseling, helping kids in dispute work things out, and to Junior Air Force ROTC. Everything was on track through his senior year when, within three months of graduation, his father said, Junior suddenly - inexplicably - dropped out. "I didn't want him to quit," Perez said. "But I couldn't do anything about it. He never told me why."

How that decision affected Junior's life was not lost on anyone, especially Junior. From his last letter to his teenage stepbrother:

"I'm sitting here in a Humvee listening to the radio waiting to send 47-lb. self-propelled missiles, waiting to give the order. ... You know, if something does happen to me out here and I can't make it home you have to buck up and be the man and take care of everybody, but it all starts with finishing school. ... If I finished school, I could be sitting behind a desk somewhere, not sitting in a truck in the desert in the middle of Iraq. So, do me one favor, if something happens to me: Finish School. ..."

It was this brotherly love that triggered the establishment of a Perez Jr. Scholarship Fund at Norwalk High.

It all started with 9/11, which changed everything for everyone.

It was shortly after the attacks that Junior felt the calling. He discussed it with his father, who accompanied the son to the recruiting office at least three times. The father was also there when the son signed the papers in mid-April 2002. Going into the Army was going to be the final piece to Junior's becoming his own man.

He left for basic training on April 25, 2002. On Saturday, July 27, Perez Sr. and Vicki, now married, were at Fort Benning, Ga., to witness Junior's graduation.

"I had a really bad feeling that day," Perez said recently, looking back. "It just didn't feel right. ... It was this big ceremony, it was hot and sunny, there were hundreds of families there. We were sitting high in these bleachers," he recalls. "The military was showing its force, tanks, smoke grenades in color, soldiers running all over performing maneuvers; it was impressive. And way in the background of this spectacular display, through the bright sun, I see what appears to be a white cross in the ground and above it, it says, 'Follow,' and below it, it says, 'Me.'"

"I got this really bad feeling: Something was going to happen to Junior."

That night, Perez confided to Vicki the feeling that overtook him when he saw the white cross.

"What white cross?" Vicki asked.

"I saw a white cross," he said.

"That wasn't a cross," she said.

"You sure?"

"Yes," she said. "It was a sword, upside down, on its side on the ground."

"It didn't feel right," Perez said again. "Something felt really bad."

At the end of August, two days before Junior shipped out to Fort Hood, Texas, father and son played golf at Oak Hill in Norwalk and Junior, in peak condition, ran the course while Perez rode the cart. The last day, they joined 1,500 others on the second Connecticut United Ride, an annual 9/11 memorial charity motorcycle ride, 60 miles through 10 towns with police escort to raise money for Connecticut firemen and police. "You know what he says to me next day when he says goodbye?" Perez asks.

"He says, 'Dad, I'm going to come back with a chest full of medals and awards, you watch.'"

The awards keep coming.

When Junior was honored by the United Hispanic Action of Norwalk, Perez said, "Now, after all this time, I've come to believe that Junior died so we could live better lives."

"I have to believe that."

Said Junior's ROTC instructor, Sgt. Douglas L. Gill, head of the Connecticut 81st Squadron, who'd witnessed Junior's turnaround from cut-up to young man with a strong sense of purpose: "Junior was a hero waiting to happen. He wanted to make his father proud. He is bigger than his family. He is bigger than Norwalk. We respect 'The National Anthem' because of people like Junior."

While training at Fort Hood, Junior kept contact through letters. Then, one winter day, he called. "Junior's unit was in Boston at the airport, bound for Kuwait. Before they boarded Junior said they collected the bolts of all the guns and he was concerned," Perez said. "He didn't like landing in the Middle East unarmed."

Assigned to Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 1st Battalion, 67th Armored Regiment of the famed 4th Infantry Division, Pfc. Perez was part of a mortar platoon that was the lead gun in the company. Brought to the Turkish region by sea from Kuwait, the 4th Infantry Division was set to enter Iraq in January 2003 from the north, through the Turkish border. But the Turks wouldn't allow it and weeks of negotiations collapsed when the Turks turned down \$6 billion in grants and more in loan

guarantees from the United States. The 4th Infantry Division was redeployed to Kuwait. By the time they got there in late March, the war had already begun. They would wait in Kuwait, Perez Sr. said, at least three weeks before entering Iraq from the south and moving up the country some 280 miles through Basra to Baghdad, and then 45 miles more to the northeast - to Baqouba, a Sunni stronghold.

"He called from Iraq once a week," Perez said. "It was 3 or 4 a.m. here. He'd wake us out of a sound sleep. I'd be laughing, asking, 'What the hell time is it?' He borrowed phones from Iraqis he'd befriended. He'd give them 20 bucks, they'd give him a cell phone and he'd make all the calls he wanted.

"A month before he was killed, he called around 2 in the morning. He told me he was getting a commendation for an arrest he took part in in Baqouba."

He last spoke to Junior "a week before he got killed. He was pretty calm," Perez says, "but you could tell that he knew where he was ..."

The Army planned to tell Junior's parents of his death simultaneously, but did not have his mother's correct address. Right after the Army officer left that Sunday, Perez stormed out of the house and in all his anger, rage and sorrow tore the American flag down off the front fence. When he first put it up, he'd told a next-door neighbor that he'd take it down when Junior came home. That neighbor happened to spot Perez walking back up the driveway with the flag. "Did your son come home?" he yelled. "No, he was killed," Perez told him.

He put the flag in the house, came back out, climbed into his blue Chevy truck and headed to the Ridgewood section of Queens to tell his ex-wife, his mother, his daughter and Junior's stepbrother and stepsister - to spare them hearing it from the Army. He also wanted to tell his three brothers and two sisters, who live in Long Island, Brooklyn and the Bronx, in person.

At about 3 p.m., Perez, on the road since 7 that morning, returned. He was in sneakers, shorts and T-shirt. Under dark, brush-cut hair his face was cracked in fathomless grief - a world destroyed. He accepted hugs amid hushed tears as Vicki's family tried to console one of its own, if it's possible to console anyone at such a moment. Then as Vicki handed Perez their 6-month-old son Roman Marcus, whom Junior never met and who had Junior's old room, Perez broke down, pulling Roman close so Roman could look over his shoulder - smiling to those standing behind him - as Perez, out of Roman's view, sobbed.

The next morning the father put the American flag back up on the fence, but this time it was a memorial. Inside a wreath was the framed photograph of Junior in his Army uniform - the same picture that kept falling off the wall.

While Perez is full of questions - like what happened, how Junior got killed - the first thing on his mind now is getting Junior home, bringing his son, who has honorably served his country, back home and burying him.

"What's the war about?" Wilfredo Perez asks rhetorically. He is caught in one of his few distraught public moments on the Cornelia Street stoop where his son played as a boy and where the father sits, tongue-tied, in concrete communion. He wipes tears: "I brought Junior to Connecticut to give him guidance and I guided him in the wrong direction. He would have been better off here."

Junior was the first state soldier to die after President Bush declared an end to major combat operations on May 1. It was 43 days after the war had begun. In his adopted hometown of Norwalk, a harbor town along Long Island Sound - officially founded on Sept. 11, 1651 - Junior was the first soldier killed in the line of duty since the Vietnam War in 1969. At that point, his death and the death of his squad members brought to 240 the number of soldiers killed in Iraq. Now the total is 1,749 soldiers killed; from Connecticut: 22 killed.

The father who once waited for the son to be born now waits for him to come home. But there's a delay. Junior's body cannot be released until funeral arrangements are made and they can't be made until Junior's will is found. By week's end, the Army concedes the will is lost and rules Junior's mother "executor." (In cases of divorce, the Army releases the body to the older parent; Perez was younger by three months.) She gets the funeral. The father has no say.

"I had no fight in me," Perez said back then. "This was about peace and dignity for Junior. I made sure the coffin was closed."

The father channeled everything he felt into prayer for his son's soul.

The day before the wake, Perez was home when a call came from Iraq. It was the head of Junior's unit, Lt. Col. Joseph Martin, commander of the 4th Infantry Division's 1st Battalion, 67th Armored Regiment, nicknamed the "Deathdealers." This was the call he was hoping for, the person Perez wanted to talk to most. "I never got to speak to anyone in person [about what happened], so I wanted to take advantage of this."

This was a time in Iraq when they didn't know how dangerous it was. There wasn't a recognizable insurgency. "Junior and the other soldiers had no helmets on. They believed it to be safe enough. They probably thought they were OK. I don't know," Perez said. "Supposedly they were in a safe zone. Behind the hospital on a break next to the building. Eight of them in T-shirts, some playing cards. Somebody dropped a grenade from a fifth-floor window. His battle buddy was the one that called out. He spotted them tossing it and yelled 'Grenade!' Instinctively all the men dove for their guns, but it was already too late.

"That's what he told me," Perez said, then stopped, "I have other details, but I don't think you should know. But it was good to know that the people [two men and a woman] who did this were caught and in prison."

They were the precious details from his son's last moments that the father brought with him to 10 hours of wakes over two days.

Eleven days after Junior was killed in Iraq, his body was in a funeral home on a tree-lined street in Queens, two white-gloved Honor Guard soldiers standing sentinel at each end of his flag-draped silver casket. His father, shaken and still in shock, sat in the peach-colored chapel gazing at the casket a few feet away that bears the remains of his son - his "best friend" - finally back from Iraq.

The father draws strength from a line of verse on Junior's laminated prayer card, God's Lent Child: "... But should Thy angels call for him much sooner than we've planned, we'll brave the grief that comes and try to understand."

Branded in the father's memory: the 60-car procession under New York Police Department escort to the cemetery, through Junior's old neighborhood - past the spot at 60th Place where scrappy Junior, then 4, had his first fight over a scooter.

Two months later, the DVD with the film of the son's memorial service in Iraq arrives in the father's mailbox. It is a harrowing, 21-minute home video - in the desert and dust of Iraq, surrounded by tanks - the field service for Sgt. Daniel K. Methvin, 22, of Belton, Texas; Spc. Jonathan P. Barnes, 21, of Coweta, Okla.; and Pfc. Wilfredo Perez Jr., of Queens, N.Y., and Norwalk, Conn., four days after their deaths.

Three pairs of combat boots. Inverted rifles with helmets on top. Behind each, a framed color photograph of each soldier. In the background, appearing to be moving almost in slow motion, military vehicles travel along the road in time-delayed digital staccato, a reminder that war continues. Taps sounds through a howling wind. Perez hasn't been able to watch the DVD to the end.

The commendation Junior mentioned on the phone arrives by mail on another day. It was for meritorious service on May 18 in Baqouba for the swift and discreet arrest of the town's police chief on a crowded market street in broad daylight. This places Junior there more than two months before he was killed - Perez's mind automatically tries to assemble random pieces of a puzzle he knows he can never solve. Always that tension between the desire to know - and not know - more.

"They found the 'Police Officer's Training Manual' among his effects," Perez says. "He'd decided he wanted to be a cop."

The father goes to the son's grave once a month. Almost never alone.

The burial site, on a hill in Cypress Miles Cemetery in Brooklyn where Junior played as a child, is marked by an American flag with Junior's name written in black indelible marker. A week after his death, the Defense Department reported Junior had made specialist three months earlier, promoted three times in 10 months. The Army had sent Perez a bronze grave marker that he was going to put there, but he was told it would likely be stolen and melted for the cash it would bring. It's outside his Connecticut home at the base of a flagpole.

Perez, Vicki, now nearly eight-months pregnant, and Roman, 2, were at the cemetery the day before Memorial Day. "We bring toys," the father says. "There are lots of toys out there. Junior had a vast collection. I brought a car this last time. The flag gets worn. I change it twice a year.

"The last time I dreamed about Junior it was faded," he says. "I couldn't make it out." He pauses, then says: "Junior touched a lot of people in special ways. I just found out a woman down the street has his picture up in her foyer." Another pause, then the father says: "But you know, the main thing is, I just miss Junior, that's all. I miss him. Just Junior. He was my right arm, my right hand. ... My right hand. I don't have it anymore."

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On June 28, a son was born to Vicki and Wilfredo Perez. His name is Michael Wilfredo Perez.

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