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Speaker urges community members to ‘fire back,’ overcome challenges

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No person is immune to adversity. We all face challenges in our lives . some big and some small . and we must learn to use our inner strength to overcome these obstacles. That is the message that guest speaker Jared Estes hoped to provide Fort Drum community members during several presentations he gave Monday and Tuesday at the Multipurpose Auditorium. As the result of a serious car accident that left him with second- and third-degree burns on 50 percent of his body, Estes was forced to learn about dealing with pain . both physical and emotional . in order to take back control of his life and focus on moving forward. Although Estes was at Fort Drum to share his story of bouncing back from this experience, he told the auditorium packed full of Soldiers that they had already proven themselves to be courageous and resilient.



"You guys are truly my heroes," he said. "I was forced into a really dark place and sort of forced to find my way out of it. You guys signed up for this, knowing that it could take you to some of the darkest places in the world. I believe that is true courage."

Estes said that while he hoped some of the tools he had learned to help him in the healing process would benefit the Soldiers, he was not there to give them advice.

"As a civilian coming into your world, I am not going to pretend for one second that I have any idea what you guys go through on a day-to-day basis. I know you guys have better people to give you advice in your life . your friends, your Family and everybody here."

What he did have to offer, Estes said, was his story. In 2005, while riding home from a hockey game, the car driven by Estes' wife, Paige, was struck by a drunk driver traveling at more than 100 miles per hour. Estes was pulled from the burning car by a passerby, and he began searching for his wife and two friends who had been in the car. After finding one of his friends leaning against the highway median, Estes began calling out to his wife and their other friend. He pushed past first responders, asking if everyone had made it out of the vehicle. Finally, a medic assured him that they all had. He had lied in order to get a severely injured Estes to the hospital. Estes soon went into a coma, and doctors medicated him to keep him comatose for the first two weeks following his accident. When he awoke, his room was full of family and friends. He immediately asked about Paige. His father ushered everyone from the room and closed the door. He told his son that Paige had not made it out of the vehicle.

"I saw him back in 2011 or 2012 at Fort Riley, (Kan.)," said the Soldier, who asked not to be identified. "He got me out of a dark time in my life. I had lost seven friends, and what he said helped get me out of that."

"Anyone who has ever lost someone knows . you just feel like someone has scooped out your insides," he said. "It's very empty and hollow, and it's like that one voice that could make everything better is a voice that you're never going to hear again."

As he lay in his bed, Estes said he asked God to let him die. When he did not die, Estes made a promise to himself that he would make it to his wife's grave. After spending two months in a hospital burn unit and three weeks in a rehabilitation center, he was finally able to make the two-hour trip to the cemetery. Sitting in a chair in front of Paige's tombstone, Estes tried to imagine what his future would be like.

"I started to think about how much better off my friends and family would be if I just died," he said. "I just sort of decided I was giving up . that I was done." As Estes sat there, Paige's mother pulled into the cemetery. Paige's two younger siblings got out of the car and rushed out to greet him. He was struck by how much their faces resembled his wife's.

Estes started to think what if it was them in the accident and not me? I would want them to come back from it and be happy and strong again, he said. That day, Estes decided he would not only recover, he would triumph over his obstacles. He endured a great deal of physical pain as he underwent 50 surgeries to repair his body.

Using tools that he said came from deep within, he worked to rid himself of anger and forgive the driver who had taken his wife from him. In November 2013, Estes left his job to fulfill his new life mission . helping others by sharing his story. At some point in all of our lives, life is going to knock us down, he said. Often times, while we are down, life is going to take a few more shots at us. People like to tell you when you get knocked down you have to get back up. I think not only do we have to get back up . we have to fire back and take a few shots of our own.

After the presentation, a young Soldier waited to thank Estes not only for sharing his story that day, but for changing the course of his life years ago. Estes saw him back in 2011 or 2012 at Fort Riley, (Kan.), said the Soldier, who asked not to be identified. He got me out of a dark time in my life. I had lost seven friends, and what he said helped get me out of that.

Sgt. 1st Class Carlos Jenkins said that he felt the presentation was especially relevant to Soldiers, who need to be resilient in order to face all that they do as they accomplish the mission.

As noncommissioned officers and squad leaders, we need to teach our Soldiers to overcome whatever they are going through, he said. This (presentation) shows that you can bounce back from any situation that you may encounter. Lori Starr, Suicide Prevention Program manager for Fort Drum Army Substance Abuse Program, said that the staff had asked Estes to speak at Fort Drum because they had heard so many positive things about his message from staff at Fort Riley.

We were really looking for someone who could come in and talk about some of the things Jared mentioned . establishing goals and looking past yourself, recognizing that no matter how dark things seem in that moment, if you put one foot in front of the other you can get through to the other end, Starr said.

We hope our Soldiers get the message that there are people around them who are willing to help and support them. They just have to be willing to extend their hand and allow these people to help them through, she added.