

# Fire back: Burn survivor shares his road to recovery

By Maria Childs

1ST INF. DIV. POST

After several months of recovery in a burn center, Jared Estes' only goal was to visit the grave of his 23-year-old wife, Paige, to let all his anger out during that visit.

In March 2005, Estes was involved in a car accident caused by a three-time DUI offender in Wichita, Kansas. The accident took the life of his wife after only six months of marriage. Now, Estes travels around the country to share his story about overcoming tragedy and loss.

Estes visited Fort Riley May 12 and 13 to speak about what he learned through his journey.

"When we were getting ready to go (to the grave) I was so excited because this had been my goal for so long and I had been using it to push myself," Estes said. "When I was using it to push myself, I always had this picture of what it would look like. In it, I saw myself kneeling down by Paige's grave and sometimes I had my hands on the ground or grabbing piles of dirt and slamming them on the ground, screaming or crying, and throwing the fit I felt like Paige deserved from me."

When he got to the cemetery the first thing he realized is that he did not have the strength or balance to kneel, so he sat in a lawn chair instead. He recalled thinking about the promise he made to himself to do this and how it made him feel when he was not able to keep the promise he made to himself.

"I started to think about how it was my goal to get to that cemetery and I didn't have a goal after that," Estes said. "Then, I started to wallow. I started thinking about how much better off my friends and family would be if I died and what a burden I must be for them ... from there, I looked at my future and I didn't see anything good. I just saw more surgeries and court dates and people not treating me like myself."

All at once, he came to the decision that he was giving up. Estes began contemplating suicide. While he was sitting there making this decision, Paige's mother showed up. Paige's siblings were in the car and wanted to see Jared. They got out and headed toward him.

"It was almost like (Paige) stepped out of that car," Estes recalled.

"For some reason that led me to think about what if it was them in this accident and not me, what would I want for them? And how it would be for them to come back from this and to be strong again — I would give or sacrifice anything to help them get back. Then I thought what if Paige and I's roles were switched and I was gone watching her give up like I was in that cemetery. It just hit me how selfish my line of thought was before that. In life, nothing is about you and when you try to make it about you that's the feeling you have inside."

Estes' story is one about resiliency. Despite enduring an incredible loss and more than 50 surgeries for his life-threatening injuries after the accident, he was able to get back up and find reasons to continue living.



“I believe we can be masters of our circumstances,” Estes said. “We can take those difficult things that should have held us down, that should have pushed us back, that should have beat us and use those things to help propel us into the future and use it to help the people around us too.”

Civilian employees of the United States Army Garrison Fort Riley were given credit for suicide prevention training for attending this presentation while Soldiers of the 1st Combat Aviation Brigade were given credit for DUI training.

“Every time I get to come to Fort Riley, I just absolutely love it,” Estes said. “It’s such a great team effort out here — whether it is the Soldier side or the civilian side — I always appreciate my time with everyone ... and it really means a lot to me to get to come out to speak.”

Lars Vesper, lead inspector of the Fort Riley Fire Department, said he doesn’t get much out of computer training, but when he was able to put a face to a story that teaches the same lesson, he’s gained more from it.

“It hit home,” Vesper said. “I’ve had friends and family members lose their lives and I’ll be honest, I’ve never had anyone go through anything that severe ... it moved me.”

Capt. Elizabeth Bell, commander of Company D, 2<sup>nd</sup> General Support Aviation Battalion, 1st Aviation Regiment, 1st Combat Aviation Brigade, 1st Infantry Division, has been in command for six months, and experienced Soldiers receiving two DUIs in that time. She said Estes provided the in-depth training they were looking for.

“I feel very fortunate that we were able to get Jared to be able to talk to us,” Bell said. “He totally blew me away. I knew what his presentation was about, but he goes so much deeper than ‘don’t drink and drive.’ He goes into reaching goals, overcoming obstacles and overcoming suicide and depression ... I felt like he was able to reach so much more of my formation than I originally anticipated.”

Sgt. Jennifer McAden, Co. D, 2nd GSAB, 1st Avn. Regt., 1st CAB, 1st Inf. Div., said it was inspiring to hear about Estes going to a dark place and finding a way to use what caused that pain to bring his message to the Fort Riley community.

“He has the strongest story of resiliency I’ve ever seen,” McAden said. “He was able to tell his story and keep it light despite the truth behind everything. I think it’s good to see someone who has been affected by a DUI, so Soldiers can see how selfish it is and how it does not just affect them.”

To schedule a presentation from Jared, call the Army Substance Abuse Program office at 785-239-1012 or visit [www.riley.army.mil/Services/Soldier-Services/Army-Substance-Abuse-Program](http://www.riley.army.mil/Services/Soldier-Services/Army-Substance-Abuse-Program).



#### **COURTESY PHOTO**

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Soldiers of the 1st Combat Aviation Brigade, 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division, listen May 12 to Jared Estes, a motivational speaker from Wichita, Kansas, share his story about being involved in a car accident that took the life of his wife, Paige. Paige was killed in a car accident nearly 11 years ago by a drunk driver, who hit the car going more than 100 mph.