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T-shirts make soldiers' experiences personal

Service members inspire line

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"You needn't be a soldier to have your own personal T-shirt."



Take Pride

(ENLARGE)

The calmer moments of Army Capt. Michael Keilty's 14-month stay in Iraq inspired this T-shirt.

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Sears, Roebuck and Co. created that advertising slogan in 1941 to encourage civilians to adopt a wardrobe basic primarily worn by men in the military. So it's ironic that the military is, in a sense, taking back the T-shirt 65 years later.

In June, Patrick Gray and John Betz launched Take Pride, a line of stylish T-shirts made with the military in mind. Mostly inspired by soldiers who served in Iraq and Afghanistan, the 11 shirts are designed to evoke the spirit of men and women in the armed forces.

For Lonnie Roberts, 33, of Tifton, the T-shirt was an opportunity to share faith and prayer that carried him through his 2003 tour of duty in Iraq.

"Once I got there, I was like, 'Yes, we need to be here because this country is unstable,'" said the Army staff sergeant, who's stationed at Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri.

On April 6, 2003, a rocket-propelled grenade hit a truck carrying Roberts and his men. He and two soldiers were injured. Pfc. Gregory P. Huxley Jr., 19, of Forestport, N.Y., was killed in the attack. Roberts shared that experience with Gray, including pictures of an emotional moment at Huxley's memorial service, and a T-shirt was born.

An image of Roberts standing in front of the Tigris River accompanies a line from Proverbs 24:20: "The lamp of the wicked shall be put out."

Another shirt features a journal entry from Robynn Murray of Niagara, N.Y., who was a 20 year-old Army infantryman during her time in Iraq. Silk-screened words describe her Feb. 2, 2005, surveying mission among the Iraqi people.

"We sat down and tried to think of a way to reach people," said Gray, who founded Take Pride in New York City with Betz, a childhood friend and a third-generation Marine. "It wasn't like we just said, 'Let's make a T-shirt company.'"

The founders of Take Pride, both 32, said they also wanted to address their peers' ambivalence toward war.

"If we could get the support and energy of young people, it would be especially meaningful for those who serve because they would see their own generation involved in this issue," said Gray. T-shirts seemed the best vehicle — not as a political message, said Gray, but as a personal introduction to people serving in the armed forces.

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Sharing the idea with soldiers, through word-of-mouth and personal contacts, yielded more than 100 stories. Gray and Betz selected the most compelling experiences for their line, priced at \$20 to \$22. The shirts are available at www.takepride.com and come in cuts and sizes suited for men and women. Take Pride donates 20 percent of the profits to veterans' charities, including an additional \$5 from sales of the Take Pride logo shirt.

So far, the company has sold about 2,000 tees to customers in 48 states, as well as soldiers stationed around the world.

Take Pride recently added two new shirts, including one based on the experiences of Michael Keilty, 29.

The Army captain from Long Island, N.Y., shared pictures from a previous 14-month stay in Baghdad, Najaf and Fallujah.

"As soon as you are at a checkpoint and stationary, the kids love to come up and take a picture," said Keilty. Those were generally the calmer moments. And that was what Gray chose to portray: a drawing of a soldier leaning forward to shake a child's hand.

Keilty, who is scheduled to return to Iraq on Dec. 10, also has served as director of charity for Take Pride, building relationships with veterans' organizations such as Fisher Houses, the Wounded Warrior Project, the USO and AnySoldier.com.

Keilty said, "Everybody served in WWII and Korea, then Vietnam came and it seems, since then, as we get involved in these long struggles ... it's not at the front of [people's] minds anymore."

Take Pride is planning other fund-raisers.

Gray said, "We are looking beyond, to doing events that are 100 percent charitable."

So, no, you don't have to be a soldier to have your own personal T-shirt, but having your own personal T-shirt could sure help a soldier out.

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