

Cindy Sheehan: Mother of Soldier Slain in Iraq Speaks Out

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She held up family photos of her son Casey as a toddler, at his confirmation, as a 21-year-old in boot camp and then, the photo that appeared in The New York Times last April, of his coffin, his brother kissing it to say goodbye.

Many in the audience at Skidompha Library in Damariscotta on Tuesday night were unable to hold back tears along with Cindy Sheehan, mother of a slain American soldier in the Iraq War. Sheehan has been traveling around the country speaking out against the war and was invited to speak here by the newly formed Peace and Justice Coalition of Lincoln County and Citizens Offering New Alternatives (CONA), with participation from Veterans for Peace and the Maine Green Independent Party.

Opening her heart-wrenching talk, she said, "I am not a political expert or a pundit. I'm just a broken-hearted mother." Sheehan said she hoped she wouldn't offend anyone in the audience, but her purpose in speaking out was to raise awareness of "the travesty of this war" and to help bring the troops home.

She presented a brief biography of her son, born in 1979 in Vacaville, Calif., an Eagle Scout and altar boy who said when he grew up he wanted to serve and help people. He was in his third year in college when he decided to join the army, professing an interest in becoming a warrant officer in the OCS.

Sheehan said she was "flabbergasted" at his decision, because he was so devoted to peace, but respected it. She remarked a number of times in her talk that serving the country in the military is "an honorable profession," and that she is proud of her son, who was a hero, but that it is this war that she feels is so wrong.

Casey became a Humvee mechanic, and was in Iraq for only two weeks when he volunteered for a very dangerous mission. His convoy was attacked and he was one of six soldiers killed on April 4 of 2004.

Her grief was almost unbearable, but then she said, "I knew I had to do something to try to stop this illegal and immoral war to prevent more soldiers from dying. People are dying every day, soldiers - but also innocent Iraqis that our government doesn't even count."

Sheehan co-founded an organization Gold Star Families for Peace, which is made up of parents, siblings and other family members of soldiers who have died in the Iraq War. Gold Star Mothers was an organization that began during the Second World War for mothers of

slain soldiers. It has been a tradition for mothers to put gold stars in their windows if their son (or now daughter) had been killed in war, but the activist connotation is more a recent evolution.

However, Sheehan said she hadn't been aware until after starting the organization that there was a group during the Vietnam War called Gold Star Moms, which also formed in protest against that war.

One of the things she would like to change is how military recruiters go about their business, going into poor neighborhoods and preying on those who cannot afford to go to college, and offering them "the world."

"Many kids go into the military because they can't afford college," she said. "I think there should be some way to help these kids." Also, recruiters should give a more honest picture of what being in the military entails, she added.

She said she doesn't want to "just complain," so offered other suggestions to get involved: to write to or try to speak personally to political representatives was particularly important. She said having an audience recently with California Senator Barbara Boxer, who had been against the war from the beginning, has probably made a difference in the senator's recent increased level of statements against the war.

Sheehan urged everyone to become more aware of what is really going on in Iraq, to read articles on websites like CommonDreams.org and Truthout.org. She said she hears from soldiers as to what is really going on, "and they are not building schools and sewer systems as the government is telling us. They are just out there killing and trying not to be killed."

She said the mainstream media really "failed us" in the rush to war, and since then, has not been reporting much on the mistakes the U.S. occupation has made, such as disbanding the Iraq army and taking away jobs from citizens and giving them to outside contractors, creating animosity and anger toward the Americans. The tragic problem of inadequate armor for the troops, which is the reason her son and many other soldiers have died or been wounded, is another travesty not mentioned enough.

Her speaking out has not endeared her to her community, she said. "I am a pariah in my own town. My best friend won't even talk to me anymore," she said. Everyone had compassion for her when her son died, but they don't seem to like the idea of her protesting the war. She said she has also been vilified in the press, accused of taking advantage of her family's tragedy.

Sheehan has been on a number of television shows, including Good Morning America, NBC and ABC. She has an article ("The Dangerous Gold Star Mothers") currently on Common Dreams.org about her group's recent attempt to talk to someone at the Pentagon, only to be rebuffed by police outside the gates.

"The time for being nice is over. We have to let our leaders know what we think. We have to help vets who have been wounded, and we have to help kids find alternatives to being recruited to go to this war. We have to put this war in peoples' faces to get them to see.

"I know Casey would want me to be doing this."

The website for Cindy Sheehan's Gold Star Families for Peace is www.gsfp.org

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