

More Costs of War: Suicides and Mental Trauma of Military Family Members

By [Colonel Ann Wright](#)

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Seven months ago, in December, 2011, Brian Arredondo, age 24, hanged himself in a shed in his mother's backyard. Brian was the brother of US Marine Corps Lance Corporal Alexander Arredondo, who was killed in Iraq in 2004. For seven years Brian had had difficulties dealing with the death of his brother.

Brian, like so many military brothers, sisters, spouses, children and parents, fell into the depths of depression following the death of his brother.

These difficulties in coping with his brother's death played out in Brian in his depression, dropping out of school, using alcohol and drugs, being in and out of drug rehab facilities, in continuing incidents with police for disorderly conduct and finally in suicide.

After the death of their son Alex in Iraq, Brian's father Carlos Arredondo and his stepmother Melida travelled the country reminding the public of those dying in America's wars on Iraq and Afghanistan-Americans, Iraqis and Afghans. Brian had joined them at Veterans for Peace events and at Occupy Boston. The Arredondos are now embarked on a mission to better understand the suicides that are occurring in military families.

At the national Veterans for Peace (VFP) conference in Miami, Florida, on August 9, 2012, Carlos told VFP members that virtually each time they have spoken at public events about Brian's suicide, after the program, a member of the audience will tell them that they have had someone in their family who has attempted suicide or committed suicide. The Arredondos say that from their first speaking engagements following Brian's suicide, that they have found an epidemic of suicides and mental trauma in military families.

We know from statistics kept by the US military, Veterans Affairs and local law enforcement officials, that 18 veterans a day commit suicide.

Brian's death represents an unknown number of members of military families who have committed suicide and the United States military is not attempting to keep track of this aspect of the costs of war on families of military personnel

In 2010, Deborah Mullen, the wife of the former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said at the Military Health System annual conference, that she was shocked that military family member suicides are not being tracked by the military. She said "...we are still discovering, still revealing, fissures and cracks in the family support system."
<http://www.jcs.mil/speech.aspx?id=1521>

Mrs. Mullen said that "military families, not unlike our troops, experience the same

depression, anxiety, sleeplessness, and headaches. They break into cold sweats ... lose concentration ... suffer panic attacks ... and come to dread contact with the outside world. Some lapse into what is known as “anticipatory grief.”

As one spouse put it, “We’re grieving as if they’re already dead, and they’re not.”

Mrs. Mullen added, “As a result, many spouses are unable even to get out of bed – to get dressed, prepare meals, or leave the house. Some won’t even get their children off to school, leaving the care of little ones to the hands of older siblings. In 2009 alone, 300,000 prescriptions for psychiatric drugs were provided to military dependents under the age of 18. Some are no doubt warranted, but I worry that we don’t fully understand the long-term consequences of these medications.”

Presentations of Carlos and Melida Arredondo at the Veterans for Peace National Convention, August 8-12, 2012

Carlos Arredondo’s Presentation:

Thank you for inviting us to speak to the national convention of Veterans for Peace. As some might know, the South Florida chapter of Veterans for Peace is named after my eldest son, US Marine Lance Corporal Alexander Scott Arredondo who was killed in Iraq in 2004, seven and a half years ago.

Today, I am going to talk to you about both of my sons, both of whom are dead because of war.

Less than eight months ago, our youngest son, Brian Luis Arredondo, age 24, hanged himself in a shed in the backyard of his Mother’s property in Massachusetts.

Our family is actively grieving Brian’s suicide and trying to comprehend how both of our boys are dead at a young age, both by such violent methods.

Brian was never the same after the death of his elder brother Alexander.

Nor was I. The day Alex died I set myself on fire at our home in Hollywood, Florida, about twenty miles north of Miami where the VFP convention is. The day I set myself on fire in the US Marine van that came to advise me of Alex’s death, my Mother, tried to stop me when the Casualty Assistance Company did not. She pulled away the gas can from me. She pulled on me to get out of the van. Only by the grace of God did she not get burned since she was right next to me when the explosion occurred. She noticed the socks on my feet were on fire and pulled them off of me and still did not get burned.

Brian was visiting his Mother in Maine when Alex was killed and saw on television as breaking news my setting the US Marine van and myself on fire.

Brian and Alex had been very close as children. When Alex joined the military, Brian began to lose his way. He stopped going to school and stopped working.

A short time after Alex’s death, Brian confessed to me that he walked the streets waiting for a bus or a truck so he could jump in front of it. That would be the first of several suicide attempts that Brian would make.

At Brian's funeral mass, I gave the eulogy and openly discussed how I had been struggling with mental health issues myself from Alex's death and how I felt culpable for not aiding Brian more in getting the help he needed. I had recognized Brian's pain - his anxiety and depression because I was experiencing the same. Yet, I seemed to be powerless to help him.

Since Alex's death seven years ago, I have experienced problems with my physical health including a brain cyst and Bell's Palsy.

Since Brian's death eight months ago, I have been experiencing high blood pressure and have gained 20 pounds.

In speaking with medical doctors, I have been told that grieving can often show itself with both physical and mental health problems.

In the years after Alex's death, I travelled around the United States talking about the effects of war. I found the work that I have done for peace and justice helped me cope with Alex's death. I have felt useful and have been inspired and supported by so many people who I have met and worked with - Ann Wright, Medea Benjamin. Bruce Macdonald, VFP's Smedley Butler chapter in Boston and many other people in this room and more.

I find it very important to meet with other Latinos and talk about my sons so that the Latino families are aware of the "side effects" to military service and how it impacts the whole family. It affects the family as soon as the decision is made for a loved one to join the military, through deployment and often beyond. We have met families who are often torn apart due to different opinions on military service. The consequences can be great.

Mélida and I have our good and our bad days. My Mom has been in the US four months this year, which has helped us both.

When Brian died, the Massachusetts peace community came together and had a peace vigil to remember him the following day where several hundred people showed up. Brian's graveside service included many Vets with Veterans for Peace flags flying in the wind at Brian's graveside. Mel and I are very grateful to have the Vets for peace honor Brian in this way.

Mel and I are focusing on suicide survivor and gold star family support groups. We have met many families who have experienced suicide with their families and military suicide.

Though not many, there are other families who have lost a loved one to combat and then their siblings to suicide. Meeting these families can be hard, but it can be healing. It makes realize that our family is not alone.

Mel and I are also working with activist writers to try to get our family's story written to remember our sons and hopefully help others.

Thank you for your support and thank you to Veteran's for Peace.

Melida Arredondo's Presentation

When a family member joins the military, the family is also drafted.

In retrospect: I realize now that both our boys were targeted by military recruiters for being from low income, Latino and divorced families.

Over the years, Carlos and I wonder how this all happened to our family. Slowly, we came to realize that what affects us also impacts other families no matter race or color of skin – the connection between those families and ours is that we are low income. So I'm speaking on behalf of all the other families who are unaware of how the economics of recruitment in this country works.

According to the US Census, families and their children are experiencing the highest degree of poverty since the 1960s.

Much of the work Carlos and I do is to aid and support military families. Some of the efforts we have successfully worked on include speaking with the two Massachusetts Secretaries of Veterans Affairs to share the economic difficulties face by military families during deployments and if a loved one dies.

Most recently before Memorial Day, a new law, called the Valor Act, was passed in Massachusetts expanding state assistance to families who have someone who is deployed and families who have lost a loved one. (Let me clarify that due to divorce or if the service member is married, many parents receive do not receive any life insurance – which is the case in our family.)

Massachusetts is a special case, however, where services for Veterans and Military families are the best in the nation compared to other states. So I ask you to consider taking on the task of seeing what your VFP chapter can do with legislation in your state to better support services for your military families. The needs of these families are not recognized.

Peace and justice work should be combined with support for military families. These acts of kindness further the message of the peace and justice community.

In addition, education of parents who are likely to have their children recruited is an important place to target peace messages. A public awareness campaign can target neighborhoods combining the realities of warfare and the violence on the streets.

It is vital for peace and justice efforts to be targeted to the society-at-large and not continue simply preaching to the converted.

We must find venues to reach out to new people. For example, recently, two members of the Smedley Butler VFP chapter (Boston), my family and I went to the finish line for the Pan Mass Challenge, a bicycle race that raises funds for cancer.

We did this to support John Niles a 75 year old VFP member who had ridden 80 miles that day. We had several VFP flags, a peace and an American flag waving in the Cape Cod air at the finish line. Dozens of people who had raced or who were cheering on cyclists came up to us and thanked us for being there and had conversations with us.

Carlos has run to the finish line of the Boston marathon with the peace flag several years, and we've attended the 4th of July celebrations in Boston with the peace message and countless other public forums. We attend many events with a message of peace whether we are invited or not.

Finally, let me put a plug in for Military Families Speak Out. This organization is facing financial hardship and lost most of its staff. Carlos and I are members and we've worked with MFSO often on lobbying on the state and national level. Through MFSO we've met other families who are faced with similar situations or have lost their loved ones as a result of war. I am asking you to consider supporting MFSO by going to www.mfso.org and by make a donation.

We did not want Alex to join the Marine Corps. Coming from Costa Rica where no army exists, we simply feared. Alex joined, he died, Brian has died and Carlos and I are left. The remainder of our families is in Costa Rica where Mom lives.

Carlos and I appreciate all of the support that VFP has provided us over the years as well as the opportunities to work side-by-side for peace –in Crawford, Minneapolis at the RNC or in Washington DC.

I want to take this moment to honor our sons –

Alexander Arredondo, Presente!

Brian Arredondo – Presente!

Peace to you all. Muchas gracias. Thank you.

To support the work of Carlos and Melida Arredondo, please contact melida_arredondo@yahoo.com.

Ann Wright served 29 years in the US Army/Army Reserves and retired as a Colonel. She was a US diplomat for 16 years and served in Nicaragua, Grenada, Somalia, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Sierra Leone, Micronesia, Afghanistan and Mongolia. She resigned in 2003 in opposition to the Iraq War. She is a member of Veterans for Peace.

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