

Zachary Iscol '97. Remarks at the John Phillips Award assembly 10/27/17

Principal MacFarlane and Wole Coaxum: Thank you for that kind introduction.

I've got a few friends here from my time at Exeter; also my sister and parents and my wife, Meredith, and our three children: Eloise, Wolf, and India. It means a tremendous amount to be able to share this moment with them – though I'm not sure who among them is the most shocked I'm receiving this incredible honor.

I think my greatest achievement at Exeter was not getting caught sneaking over to my girlfriend's dorm in the middle of the night.

[When I got into Exeter, one of my grade schoolteachers told me I shouldn't go because I'd probably just fail out and that this place was an unhealthy pressure cooker.

But I took that as a challenge. And I'm glad I did because it became a formative experience that quite possibly saved my life.]

When I got here, I was what you might call a late bloomer. My mom, who is sitting right there, even sent me a book, *Leo the Late Bloomer*, about a tiger that was smaller than all the other tigers.

I got cut from the JV Waterpolo team.

And I got cut from the JV Hockey team.

But Sam Aaronian, who was kind, generous and smart, one of the best members of our class - who is sadly no longer with us - Sam talked to his dad, Coach Aaronian, along with a few players from the team, including Mike Kolodner who is here today - and Coach put me back on the team.

I was that good of a benchwarmer.

I'm almost definitely the last person in my class anyone would expect to go on and do anything worth honoring with an award with John Phillips' name on it.

But Exeter really is a remarkable place.

That can be hard to appreciate when you're here. But I hope you do appreciate it. I hope you know that, if you're in this room, you're among the luckiest and most fortunate on earth.

There is something special about a place where people come together at a round table from so many different backgrounds - a place to listen, argue, let ideas stand on their merits, challenge each other, and grow from it.

I don't need to tell you how divided the world is.

Take this NFL controversy over kneeling vs standing for the flag.

Do you know that when Colin Kaepernick first started protesting, he didn't kneel? He sat.

And then he received a letter from Nate Boyer, an NFL lineman, Green Beret, and Iraq and Afghanistan veteran.

Nate told Colin that he thought sitting was disrespectful to the flag, to veterans, and to those who died for this Country.

And you know what happened next?

They had a conversation, much like the ones I hope you are still having around the Harkness table, and agreed that kneeling showed reverence for the flag and veterans, while also issuing a call of duress for black men in America.

At Exeter you have the opportunity to have those types of conversations every. single. day.

And those skills are needed in the world - the ability to listen to each other, to respond with mutual respect despite differences of opinion. There is no place for strawman arguments when you are sitting next to someone at that round table.

The most important teachers you have here are your classmates.

Treat each other with kindness and an open mind. Give them a chance to ride the bench, stay up late talking about your greatest fears and dreams.

Take every opportunity you have to step outside the bubble. Put yourself in situations that challenge the way you think about the world. Start here. Don't wait until you graduate, or after college.

It'll serve you well in life.

It definitely served me well. It possibly even saved my life.

[Listening to Wole read the citation, most of what I've achieved has really just been because I've had the privilege to know and work alongside some extraordinary people over the past 20 years. This award is really a tribute to their work.]

This award, while an incredible honor, really belongs to the people I've had the privilege to know and work with over the past 20 plus years since I graduated.

In 2004, I was put in charge of a combined unit, CAP India, of 250 Iraqi soldiers and 30 US Marines in Al Anbar. I was a 23-year old Jewish kid living with and leading Muslim troops in the most violent part of Iraq.

But you know what informed my success? My first roommate at Exeter, Erin Tasar, was Muslim. I fasted with him for one day of Ramadan; and he taught me to say Salam and I taught him to say Shalom.

And Adnan Zulfiqar, who was just a cool, charismatic, upperclassman in Main Street - the type of upperclassman who really looked out for the younger kids in his dorm. No underclassman would ever get bullied or knocked around if Adnan was around.

That small window into Islam, so different than the way Muslims are portrayed in the media, opened the door for me to forge deeper relationships with my Iraqi soldiers and also with local religious and tribal leaders. And those relationships kept us safe.

We were never attacked in the town we lived in. We were attacked outside of it, but never in the town where we'd built those relationships.

I also had extraordinary Marines. Men like Sgt. Anthony Alvarado and Corporal Alex Martinez.

During the Second Battle of Fallujah, the biggest battle of the Iraq War, Alvarado was wounded during the second day. Martinez took over as our platoon sergeant, despite it being a billet for someone with twice his rank.

We also lost our translators during that fight. One was shot and wounded and the other had to be evacuated for other medical issues.

When you're leading a mixed unit of Iraqi soldiers, who don't speak English and US Marines, who don't speak Arabic, during three weeks of high-intensity combat operations, translators are kind of important.

But most of my Hispanic Marines, who grew up speaking Spanish and English had been able to learn enough Arabic by then that we were able to operate seamlessly.

It was amazing to watch them in action: kicking down doors, engaging the enemy, and yelling commands in Arabic while leading Iraqi soldiers.

To this day, those Marines are my heroes and I was just fortunate enough to work with them.

Three years ago, my media company published an investigative piece about anonymous online groups of Marines, if you can even call them that, who were sharing naked photos of female Marines and soldiers and girlfriends. They were even putting bounties out, asking each other for photos of specific women, sometimes with hidden cameras or other sick means.

The article led to investigations and changes to Marine Corps policy, though definitely not enough.

It was written by my co-founder, Brian Jones, class of 2008, who left Exeter and enlisted in the Marines and served in Afghanistan.

He received a few death threats. We received hate mail, my director of operations, Katie, an Iraq veteran, even received rape threats over the phone.

But you know what I learned watching Brian's response to all that hate? None of it mattered. We were in the right and stood up for something we believed in.

There's an old saying that success has many fathers but failure is an orphan. It's usually interpreted to mean that everyone wants to take credit for something successful, but no one will take ownership of a failure.

There's another way to look at it.

The times I've been most successful have been when I've had co-founders or been part of a bigger team and when I've been least successful, it's been when I've struck out on my own.

I had a translator in Iraq, Abood. He looked like Gepetto and though pushing 60, kept up with us on long patrols and would always put himself in harm's way to be there for his Marines. Abood helped me navigate the worst of our deployment.

In 2007, Shi'a militiamen left a severed dog's head on his door with a note that he and his family would be next for working with Americans. So they fled Iraq to Jordan and I began working to get them to the United States.

My Exeter classmate, Cindy Chang, was working at the State Department at the time. Her job was liaison to the Senate, so she took me up to Capitol Hill in my uniform, and we started literally knocking on doors, hoping to find someone who would be willing to help.

The last office we visited was Senator Ted Kennedy's. He wasn't in, but we left our contact information and left, feeling that we'd failed that day.

I'll never forget this moment - we hail a cab, get in, and Cindy gets a message from a woman named Janet Kayugatan in Senator Kennedy's office.

"Is this the same Cindy Chang who helped Senator Kennedy's constituents get out of Beirut when Israel attacked last year? Senator Kennedy owes you, what do you need?"

Senator Kennedy, the lion of the Senate and brother to President John F Kennedy and my personal hero Robert F. Kennedy, owed my classmate Cindy Chang a favor. At her request, he invited me to testify before the Senate. Legislation was soon passed, creating a special visa saving thousands of Iraqi and Afghan translators, and Abood and his family made it to the United States.

Abood AlKafajee passed away from cancer a few years ago, I was by his side and I know he's here in spirit today.

His daughters are doing well. One is an officer with the NYPD, another will be joining soon, and the third is studying to be a nurse.

They are a remarkable American family.

And there are also my failures, the times I stubbornly tried to do things alone and without any support.

Like when I left the Marine Corps and decided I would be a filmmaker.

Within a few years, Al Anbar province had turned from being the most violent part of Iraq to being one of the safest and most peaceful.

It had little to do with anything we did early on in the war. We were too quick to violence and probably created more enemies than we defeated.

But after years of protracted violence, the Marines began to take a different approach. They realized we didn't need to fight everyone we were fighting against; that some of our enemies had legitimate grievances, and that negotiation and battlefield diplomacy might yield better results.

Some, like Al Qaeda, were fighting us, well because they were Al Qaeda and there was no reconciling with them.

But other groups were fighting us because they were nationalists, or because of tribal loyalties, or because they were getting paid, or because we'd killed a family member.

These groups deserved to be heard and so Marines started reaching out and doing the hard work of listening, assuaging grievances, and building alliances with former enemies against Al Qaeda.

I thought this was an important story that needed to be told. Capturing those hard-earned lessons and ensuring we never repeated some of our mistakes again was a way of giving greater meaning to the sacrifices of those we lost.

But I made the mistake of trying to do everything myself. I wrote the film, produced it, and directed it.

And the truth is - and this is painful to admit – it wasn't very good. It is honestly a blessing that so few have watched it.

Perhaps if I'd built a team, found a world-class director and writer, things would have turned out different and maybe some of those lessons would be remembered.

It's no wonder that when I look at one of my proudest achievements, Headstrong, I'm one of five co-founders. Success has many fathers.

About five years ago, I grabbed beers with my former Battalion Commander in NYC. He had a worried look on his face.

We'd had a terrible suicide in our battalion, a former sergeant came home, kissed his wife and kids, went upstairs, and killed himself with a gunshot to the head.

We'd lost 33 Marines in combat; today our battalion has lost 23 more to suicide. For too many, it can feel impossible to deal with the survivor's guilt that you came home and a better man, in my case Ronnie Winchester, did not.

Or to live with the guilt and shame that you made a decision in combat that led to an old man, with faulty brakes, dying by the side of the road because you mistook his truck barreling toward your position as a suicide bomber.

Or the grief knowing you'll never see a fallen buddy again.

We started the Headstrong Project to provide the world-class care, without cost or bureaucracy, that veterans need to return from war, heal their hidden wounds, and get back to the best version of themselves.

We treated our first veteran almost exactly five years ago in New York City and today have expanded to eight additional cities.

We've also shown that if you have the courage to get help, and you get the right help, you can absolutely get over PTSD or other forms of trauma.

One of my co-founders is a clinician named Gerard Iliaria.

Gerard started his career as a therapist working for the Gay Men's Health Crisis providing treatment to gay men and their partners with HIV.

And while he was doing this, he was going home each night to take care of his own partner who was dying of AIDS.

In the midst of his own personal tragedy, Gerard was going to work every day to help other gay men through their own traumas.

And now, through Headstrong, he is caring for hundreds of veterans.

I grabbed coffee recently with one of these vets - A Navy SEAL, multiple combat deployments - the last person you'd ever imagine getting mental healthcare.

He said to me, you know the remarkable thing about Gerard? What it's like for you and me to walk around Arlington National Cemetery and see so many friends, that's what NYC must be like for him. He knows people who lived and died all over this city. The fact that he is who he is today, is such an example for me.

Any success we've had at Headstrong is largely due to Gerard's and the rest of our clinical team's compassion, professionalism, and deep knowledge of mental health.

I am just lucky enough to work with them.

I want to leave you with one last story about one of my friends who is buried in Arlington: Captain John Maloney.

He was one of my instructors at the Marine Corps' Infantry Officer Course. It was late one night, after a grueling hike. We were tired and exhausted. Sitting around on our packs, rifles in hand, Captain Maloney asked us a simple question.

"What comes first, your mission or your Marines?"

All of us knew that we were soon headed off to war and that we would have to make that type of decision soon.

After some discussion, most of us came to an agreement. The mission always had to come first. We were Marines. That's what we do, we accomplish the mission.

Someone asked Captain Maloney what he thought.

"You take care of your Marines. They'll take care of the mission."

I've been fortunate in my life that I've found myself surrounded by remarkable people with vital missions. You're surrounded by those people today at Exeter. People like Erin, Adnan, Brian Jones, and Cindy Chang. And when you go out in the world, find more good people like Gerard and Tony Alvarado and Alex Martinez. They are the real owners of this award.

Thank you.