



# Iraq War Veteran and Purple Heart Recipient Seeks MSW at Touro

*Staff Sgt. Omar Domenech plans to help fellow soldiers and veterans overcome the stigma of seeking mental health services*

BY GAIL SCHILLER

**O**N HIS FIRST DEPLOYMENT TO IRAQ from January to December 2004, Staff Sgt. Omar Domenech avoided injury despite coming under constant mortar fire at his military base, Camp Anaconda, but many of his comrades were not as fortunate. His battalion lost 13 soldiers and many suffered serious injuries.

During his second deployment at Camp Tallil Air Base from February 2006 to March 2007, Staff Sgt. Domenech was knocked

to the ground by a mortar round that missed him by about only 200 feet and suffered shrapnel wounds to his arms. He received a Purple Heart medal for his injuries and the Combat Action Badge but another seven soldiers that he knew died in combat.

On his third and final tour of duty from August 2007 to September 2008, Staff Sgt. Domenech was engaged in much less combat and witnessed only one more soldier die while stationed at Camp Arifjan, about 40 miles from the Iraqi border in Kuwait.

But when he returned to his home base of Fort Bragg in North Carolina, he began suffering from night terrors and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Staff Sgt. Domenech had trouble sleeping, isolated himself, taunted his soldiers, and became verbally abusive to everyone around him. “Living through war is a trauma,” he said. “I’m never going to forget what happened to me—the three years of combat and watching so many soldiers die.”

While stationed back at Fort Bragg—one of the most combat-ready and active U.S. military installations—from October 2008 to June 2009, Staff Sgt. Domenech realized he needed help and reached out to a psychologist at the Womack Army Medical Center. Four months of therapy helped Staff Sgt. Domenech cope with the psychological impact of his wartime experiences and made him realize it was okay to talk about his post-traumatic stress disorder.

**I**t was that experience that inspired Staff. Sgt. Domenech, an alumnus of Touro College’s undergraduate school NYSCAS, to enroll in the Touro Graduate School of Social Work so that he could help other soldiers and veterans who need mental health services but are afraid to seek them out.

“In the army there is a stigma attached to seeking mental health services because you’re trained to be a soldier and you’re

trained to be strong so that conditioning becomes part of the soldier's psyche," he said. "From the very beginning, basic training is designed to turn you from a civilian into a soldier and the mentality is if you feel pain, suck it up and move on. You don't want to be an outcast or ridiculed and a lot of people feel that talking about their problems could hinder promotional opportunities. Your superiors might question your ability to lead if you have psychological issues.

"But it's important for soldiers to seek mental health services and it's important for someone who has been in their shoes to tell them that it's okay to do so. I was at war three times. I think when soldiers see a fellow veteran reaching out, opening up and addressing the issue of war trauma, it might lead them to do the same. Divorce, domestic violence, suicide and substance abuse are big problems in the active army but there is a stigma if soldiers seek help."

Staff Sgt. Domenech, who started out as a specialist during his first deployment, was promoted to sergeant during his second deployment, and staff sergeant during his third, left active duty in June 2009 to pursue his MSW.

"The decision to reenlist came up so I decided to leave active duty because I was tired of all the deployments and stressed out," he said. "You witness explosives and shootouts and a lot of people dying, and you come close to death yourself. I thought, 'let me enjoy life.' I figured why don't I leave the army and serve in another capacity and that's when grad school came into my mind and I decided to study social work to help other soldiers out who might think it's a sign of weakness to seek mental health services."

Staff Sgt. Domenech, who also served as a first responder following the 9/11 World Trade Center terrorist attacks and volunteered to help victims of Hurricane Katrina, is already working with veterans as part of his MSW field placement at Touro. He is interning at the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services Home Again Program, which focuses on helping veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan seek mental health services.

"Omar Domenech is a true American hero who makes a difference every day," said Graduate School of Social Work Dean Steven Huberman, Ph.D.

**W**hen Staff Sgt. Domenech thought about where to attend graduate school for social work, Touro was the obvious choice. Not only did Staff Sgt. Domenech attend Touro's NYSCAS for his undergraduate studies, he met his wife at Touro's Sunset Park, Brooklyn campus, his mother earned her bachelor's degree in early childhood education from Touro when Staff Sgt. Domenech was a teenager, and his brother met his wife, a former Touro employee, when he went to NYSCAS to look for Staff Sgt. Domenech in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. In addition, Staff Sgt. Domenech's wife started her graduate degree in early childhood education at Touro last summer.

"I feel like Touro has always been there for me," Staff Sgt. Domenech said. "Whenever I needed to talk to someone, the faculty and staff have always taken the time to help me. They always show concern and ask me how I'm doing. I have a sense of loyalty since Touro has always been so good to me."

Staff Sgt. Domenech said he is enjoying the social work program, and appreciates the fact that Dr. Huberman reaches out to the military. "I'm happy I'm in the Touro social work program. I've learned a lot since I've been here. I get along very well with Dean Huberman. He has respect for what the military does for this country. Not only has he taken the time to listen to me and help me since I've been at the school, I really like the fact that he's active in trying to do his part to reach out to the military and seeing how he can help as well."

Dean Huberman arranged for Staff Sgt. Domenech to be the featured speaker at a full-day community program about the role of social work in the military organized



**Staff Sgt. Domenech on patrol in Iraq**

by the Graduate School of Social Work in November 2009. "The program addressed military issues and how social workers can play a bigger role in trying to help veterans seek services. I thought it was a great way to address this concern. I was happy to be a part of it and share my experiences as a veteran so that others could see how war impacts a soldier."

Staff Sgt. Domenech said once he graduates this June, he hopes to reach out to army commanders and other social workers in an effort to get soldiers and veterans the mental health services they need. "I hope to be able to reach out to actual commanders if possible and network with other social workers or maybe organize a day during which social workers could speak to an auditorium full of soldiers to help them understand that it's okay to seek mental health services."

Staff Sgt. Domenech did his basic military training at Fort Sill, Okla. and his advanced individual training at Fort Bliss, Texas.

Prior to enlisting in the army full time and serving active duty at Fort Bragg, Staff Sgt. Domenech served in the National Guard while he was studying at NYSCAS and was called up in the aftermath of 9/11. His unit was one of the first responders to the World Trade Center disaster. His job was to recover bodies from the wreckage as well as protect the site from looters.

"I had a kind of weird out-of-body

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experience because everything was just destroyed. I can remember this terrible smell of the burnt bodies and there was still a lot of ash surrounding the area. It looked like a little war zone in downtown Manhattan. It was this gloomy, sad image right in my own hometown and I'll never forget it."

After 9/11, Staff Sgt. Domenech felt compelled to do more to fight the war against terror. He worked for the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) as a security screener at JFK Airport for about a year before enlisting in the army.

"What happened on 9/11 motivated me to go into army," he said. "I felt like I was helping to protect the airlines working for the TSA, but I wanted to serve in a different capacity. I wanted to go to the Middle East to make a difference and do my part."

**O**n his first deployment to Iraq, Staff Sgt. Domenech was part of a convoy security team. He usually drove an armored Humvee but sometimes served as a gunner as well to suppress enemy gunfire and protect the convoy.

During his second tour of duty, Staff Sgt. Domenech was again part of a convoy security team but also served as a responder. He drove around his military camp at night accompanied by a medic and another soldier with a spotlight to determine if any military personnel were injured by incoming, indirect mortar fire.

Recalling the night he was injured, he said, "That night when I was going to request other personnel to come help me, I could hear another incoming mortar round and the impact was maybe about 200 feet away from me. I remember not being able to see anything from the blast and I received some shrapnel to my right arm. The blast had knocked me down. I was treated at the medical facility at the base and they were able to remove the shrapnel."

On his third and final deployment to Iraq, Staff Sgt. Domenech was in charge of route reconnoitering for military logistics vehicles called HETS (Heavy Equipment Transport System), which frequently transport tanks, armored personnel carriers and other heavy military vehicles in security convoys.

"This time I did not drive and I was not

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**— Staff Sgt. Omar Domenech**



engaged in much combat. I was called an assistant truck master and was more behind the scenes. I was in charge of all the logistical aspects of route reconnoitering. We were basically ensuring the safety of transporters the best that we could."

Staff Sgt. Domenech also helped the victims of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in between his first two deployments as part of his active duty service.

Married with three children—two daughters, ages 14 and 12, and a newborn son—Staff Sgt. Domenech is doing his best to cope with his post-traumatic stress disorder while he earns his MSW from Touro.

"War trauma always stays with you," he said. "You just have to deal with it and look on the bright side of life. It is something you don't forget. At the end of the day I think it requires the individual to resolve to overcome post-traumatic stress. Mental health counseling was a good tool in helping me get better and understand that it's okay to talk about what I went through."

Staff Sgt. Domenech is extremely grateful to Touro College for giving him the opportunity to earn the MSW degree that will enable him to also help his fellow veterans receive the mental health treatment they need. "I am grateful to Touro for accepting me into the program when I first arrived back to New York City after having served in the military," he said. "The Graduate School of Social Work has an amazing staff dedicated to enlightening the students in not only what it means to be a social worker but having us also understand the field from many perspectives whether it be social, political or any other system that has an effect on an individual.

"I am thankful not only for the staff's dedication to students but to Dean Huberman especially for taking the time to ensure I was doing well in class and always following up with me. Touro's Graduate School of Social Work has been a great experience and I look forward to utilizing the tools I have been equipped with here and taking them into the field."

Despite the physical and psychological injuries suffered during his military service, Staff Sgt. Domenech does not regret serving in Iraq. "I'm proud of my service. The experiences that came with it as far as the sadness are things I'm going to have to deal with, but I don't regret my service," he said. "I'm happy to be alive, to be able to spend time with my family and to go back to school to eventually help other veterans seek mental health services. I still remember a lot of the violence and death but I get by day to day. I feel that I did my part. I feel very fortunate I survived three deployments; some people don't survive one." ■

# Graduate School of Social Work Receives National Accreditation

Marking a major milestone, Touro College's Graduate School of Social Work recently earned national accreditation from The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), the exclusive national accrediting body for social work higher education.

CSWE accreditation is a rigorous multi-year process that verifies social work degree programs meet high standards considered essential to high quality social work education. The CSWE voted to grant national accreditation from the academic year of 2007-2008—the year in which the School of Social Work held its first commencement—through 2015.

“Congratulations to founding Dean Dr. Steven Huberman and the faculty and staff at the school, who have worked diligently toward this momentous milestone that acknowledges the outstanding partnership between Touro College’s administrators and the effective leadership provided by the school,” Touro College President and CEO Dr. Alan Kadish said in announcing the CSWE accreditation this past February. “The Graduate School of Social Work has much to be proud of, and its achievements are a credit to all at Touro.”

Among the school’s strengths the CSWE acknowledged in its accreditation

site report are the school’s emphasis on diversity, solid programs in fieldwork and advisement, and the commitment of faculty to program success.

“With this significant recognition, the school’s competent and empathetic professionals will continue to pursue their commitment to community service and academic excellence, not only in the New York metro area but globally,” said Dean Huberman. “Our social work graduates are now poised to attain top social work positions throughout the United States and around the world.”

Dr. Huberman cited highlights of the CSWE report, which lauded some of the School of Social Work’s achievements, including supportive college administrators who value the social work program; successful leadership embodied in a collegial and transparent leadership style; importance placed on diversity, which it called a “hallmark” of the program; a very strong, well-managed fieldwork program that provides excellent support for instructors and students, and hard-working, responsive faculty who, the report stated, are “an exemplar of collegiality and committed to student achievement.”

The report also noted that the School of Social Work had established cohesive external relationships through a professional advisory board and a field educational

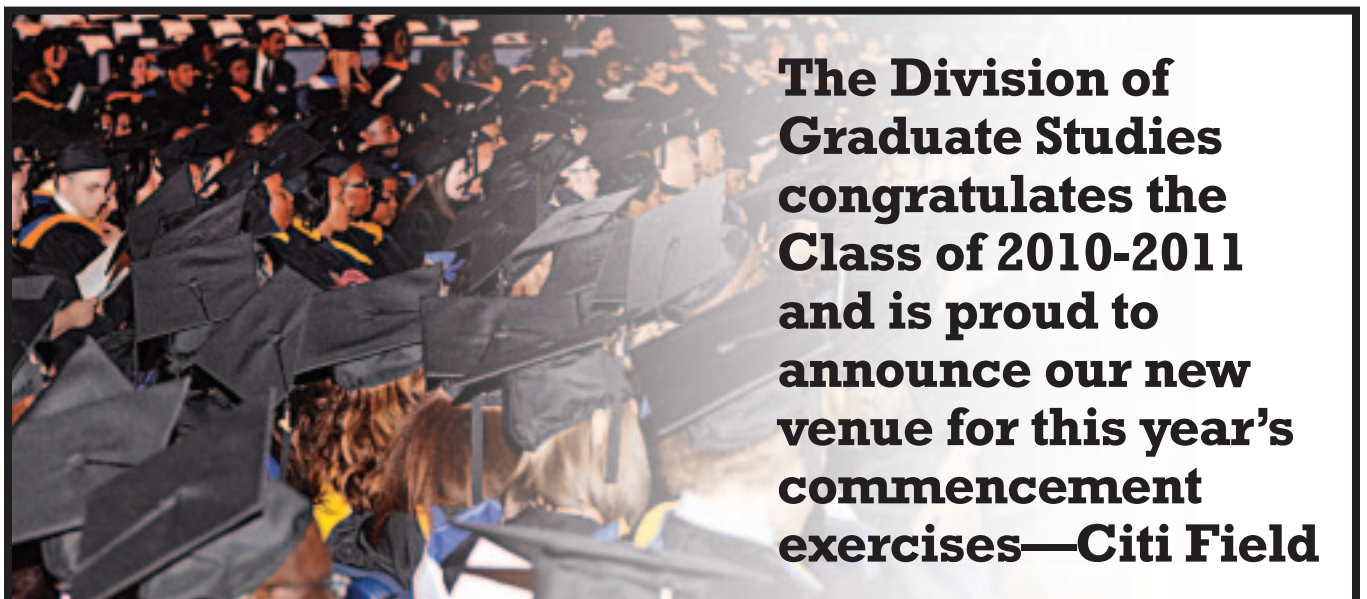


Dean Steven Huberman, Ph.D., left, and Touro College President and CEO Dr. Alan Kadish holding letter of national accreditation

advisory committee, as well as a state-of-the-art technology library and electronic resources, with information literacy support for both students and faculty.

The Touro College Graduate School of Social Work held its first commencement in 2008, conferring master’s degrees in social work to an inaugural class of 43 students. Today, the school has more than 215 graduate students at its locations in midtown Manhattan and Brooklyn. ■

*This article was written by Barbara Franklin and Jennifer Berkley with editing by Gail Schiller*



**The Division of Graduate Studies congratulates the Class of 2010-2011 and is proud to announce our new venue for this year’s commencement exercises—Citi Field**