

DON'T FORGIVE ME DON'T FORGET ME

The Grief of Carlos Arredondo who lost his son in Iraq

When the Marines refused to leave after telling him the tragic news, Carlos set fire to their SUV and himself, depending on how you understand grief and rage holding a gas propane torch.

Carlos Arredondo is a handsome man, exquisitely *mestizo* in that fair-skinned way we're proud of, sculpted, lithe, with a burning grief inside him that is haunting and also very *familiar*. The gringos in the mainstream media have described him as *medio-loco*, but we Latinos know that silence is a kind of crazy too.

Carlos speaks with an adult-learned *inglés*, a scarred, calloused, naked language of emotions because the English words he knows cannot tell the whole story. He smiles much more frequently when he speaks his native *español*, and you can see how in another life, he could've been a movie star. But in this life, he's driven the Boston/NYC route that I've been on several times. He still deserves an Oscar for the role of a lifetime – a father's heroic journey toward peace in the name of his beloved son who didn't believe he would die.

On September 30, 2006, Carlos Arredondo spoke on a panel titled "Losing a Loved One to War," hosted at the Esperanza Center in San Antonio, Texas. Here are excerpts from that night **[the brackets are mine]**

I immigrated to the United States in the early 80s, the U.S. was pounding Somoza [in Nicaragua] with supplies and weapons and Russia was supplying the Sandinistas so these two powerful nations in the world were picking a fight in these small nations, we're still suffering the consequences.

I came to the U.S. because I have a dream when I cross the border in Arizona I entered as a illegal alien, and [have] spent all that time in Boston, these past 26 years in America. I met my ex-wife, a really good Irish woman, and let me tell you it's [hard] being an immigrant in an Irish country...

My son pretty much was in the high schools in Boston, [Blue Hills Regional Technical School, 1999] in the military, I thought it was the safe place they seduced him they call it volunteer but they cannot fool me I'm from a third world country and I was the last member of the family [to be told] that he was being a marine even though I'm the one who wears the pants though my wife makes the decisions.

I told my son you know how I feel, I don't want you to be involved in this, I'm very worried, I don't want you to get back in a body bag, I pray for you, I support you.

He served two tours in Iraq and by that time I had it. In the media I was looking and hearing, you know, how some people don't want, I want to make a difference. [My son] was struck by a sniper in the temple and the guy who killed my son is sitting in the Iraqi Parliament...

Let me tell you by the time the marines came to my house [with] the news about my son's death I had already developed a post-traumatic stress knowing that other parents had buried their sons and daughters and look at these photos (he shows an enlarged photo of American soldiers in Iraq) give me a break is that disgusting these are children.

This is how they brought my son back (he shows another enlarged photo of his son, this time, in his casket). That's not right that's not right just because somebody thinks that's right.

When they came to tell me about my son's death I asked them to leave in 20 minutes, it was my birthday they didn't even bother to tell me, can we go inside there was my 64-year old mother who can't speak English, none of them speak to me in Spanish.

When I saw them I thought it was my birthday surprise, then I thought it was they were trying to recruit my son Brian. By the time I asked them to leave for the third time I was already inside the marine van with a propane gas torch.

I already had it being in Boston [he currently lives in Florida] being treated as an immigrant, I grew up in a country where my best friend was black and then I'm in Los Angeles [where he first settled] and see the Vietnam veterans begging for money?

You think I was going to allow my son to go there and when my son got killed they came and did whatever they want. When this happened Bush was in

Hollywood, Florida, August 2004, trying to get re-elected. I heard gossip about how my son died, I found 10 months later in an email that came from Maine how my son died, in an email, I didn't have any experience, I thought perhaps that was the process, just recently I was invited to Camp Pendleton to receive the last information.

The last conversation I had with my son he call me, said Dad, I hope you are proud of what I'm doing don't forgive me Dad.

Oh my God how can I forgive you [he says it again] I love you, you're my son, very proud, you're my son.

When he died I realized I thought my God he already killed somebody, he's feeling the guilt already.

If he was in America he'd be with this mind destroyed, his heart torn apart because how normal is it to kill another human being? How can they take our sons and daughters to be killers for something they cannot handle it?

I never speak in public.

Carlos has been traveling nationally, he's been to Waco with Cindy Sheehan, and showed us photos of his truck with a real casket draped with an American flag in the truckbed that he's parked at the Capitol.

I come out a year later after my son died and the reason is that last year I had a conversation with my ex-wife who told me that she spoke to Alex before he went on his second tour to Iraq, he was home: "Mom, I don't want to go back, want to stay with the family," it was like a knife in my back because I'm responsible, I feel guilty for not doing anything about it.

Thank God I had an open casket because I got to say to my son I'm sorry for not doing nothing about it remember my son saying: "Dad don't forget about me."

I don't forget and want to honor my son if let me tell you we have thousands more than the number who died on September 11 so if 9/11 was a revenge let me tell you payback is more difficult for all of us.

You might only know numbers - my son was 968 killed in Iraq.

Lance Corporal Alexander Arredondo of Randolph, Massachusetts, died at the age of 20 years, 20 days and was one of the first Marines entering Baghdad. He was on his second tour when he was killed by a sniper. Carlos' remaining son, Brian, has been contacted by the National Guard.