

Each AGC/Rescue Task Force(RTF) backpack represents an incredible story of Courage, Bravery, and Sacrifice

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We had a mission to perform...to personally deliver some AGC/RTF backpacks to the severely wounded soldiers (or “warriors” as they prefer to be called) to **Brooke Army Hospital** in San Antonio, Texas. **These backpacks were made possible by the generous donations from AGC members across the country.**

As we drove up to the hospital, we were instructed to meet the hospital’s “Casualty Liaison”, Kevin, at the flagpole in front of the hospital. **How symbolic....the American Flag** standing directly in front of the hospital reminding us civilians on the outside of the severely injured warriors on the inside, **who have made sacrifices to serve our country.**

As we stood in the lobby of the hospital to obtain our I.Ds., many recovering “warriors” started coming up to meet us. Enrique lost the tips of his fingers in a mechanical accident. Jose, who was in a coma for three months and was not expected to live, just finished his painful physical therapy session for his hand so he will be able to make a fist again, along with his mother who moved to San Antonio to be with her only son and “her baby.” We also met a young woman whose husband just arrived days earlier. She had quit her job and moved out to San Antonio with her 2-year-old daughter to be at her husband’s side while he will be recovering. **She told us her first priority is “family,” and nothing else matters at this very moment...** the home she left thousands of miles away, her job, money, etc. Her life will be on hold for several months or possibly years, and she didn’t seem to mind, “*This is what you do for love,*” was her comment, and her dedication and support she gives to her husband is all that she is focusing on right now.



The liaisons role is to ensure that each new patient admitted receives a backpack the moment they arrive to the hospital. These liaisons are soldiers and marines that come to work each day to care for their wounded buddies. They are responsible for keeping moral high, and they are the ones that coordinate the needs of family members that stay by the bedside of their loved ones. The liaison staff deals with pain, infection, quarantine, the induced comas, healing, and recovery every day. Kevin (*pictured*) personally knows their pain...he too was burned several years ago, and understands the agony firsthand...the many skin grafts they will endure, the repeated surgeries, the heartache, the long recovery process, the grueling physical therapy, the impact on family members, and finally, the acceptance of the scars that will forever remain on his face, arms and body. These liaisons are the bravest, most dedicated young men and women you could ever meet.



The backpacks each patient receives represented more than just material items. It was a symbol that they were being thought of by Americans and were not forgotten. **They could not thank us enough...**while we were the ones thanking **them** for their **sacrifice, dedication and service to our country.** It was an amazing and humbling experience.

All warriors had said they would go back in a minute to be with their unit, and one soldier proudly declared, *“We’re more than brothers.”* They all felt that they are serving a purpose in Iraq and Afghanistan, and they truly love their jobs and the service they are providing to help the people in these war-torn places who are facing difficult challenges.



We were given a private tour of the **Center for the Intrepid (CFI)**...a 65,000 sq. ft. state-of-the art facility that was donated by a NY real-estate developer, Arnold Fisher, in addition to donations by over 600,000 Americans. This amazing rehabilitation center, (painted in red, white, and blue with stars and stripes on the carpet and doors), treats amputees, burn patients, and limb salvage patients. These many young men and women spend hours learning to walk, drive, cope with non-ADA compliant environments, deal with the most basic elements of daily living in which we take for granted, and cope with episodes of post-traumatic stress. There is also the Fisher House, which houses over 42 families while they care for their loved ones. It is their “home away from home.”

CFI also includes a gait lab, which is fitted with 24 cameras on an automated truss, which uses infrared light to analyze human motion, a computer assisted rehabilitation environment, a golf swing apparatus, a virtual driving simulator that helps them learn to adjust to driving without limbs in a virtual setting that parallels real driving experiences. Patients can also practice with weapons, using a Firearms Training Simulator that puts them on a 'virtual range' using 9 mm and M-4 replicas.

Other state-of-the-world strengthening and physical therapy tools include a treadwall, a 21-foot climbing tower, an indoor running track, and a natatorium with a six-lane pool. We were most impressed with the Flowrider, which is similar to a wave machine that helps promote balance, strength, motivation and confidence. There are kayaks used to build upper muscles, a Nintendo “Wii” for eye-hand coordination and movement, a prosthetic lab to teach them how to perform their own maintenance on their prosthetics, and a fully furnished apartment that was created to give patients a real-world environment to practice everyday skills used for occupational therapy. There is also a Computer Assisted Rehabilitation Environment (CAREN), which is a 21-foot dome with a 300-degree screen upon which a variety of “virtual realities” are displayed. There is a video conferencing center for these warriors to communicate with their unit back in Iraq and Afghanistan.



To get a respite from their day-to-day therapy, 24 patients and their families joined us at a themed restaurant where the servers dressed up in character. Our waiter was *Dennis the Menace*, and he **made us all laugh**, which was **great therapy** and allowed them to forget about life for a while. It was during this setting when the “warriors” and their families began to relax and open up, sharing their stories with us. Irma, Jose’s mother, cried when she was telling us about the three months her son was in a coma, and how he was given his last rites. Jose described the vivid dreams he remembered while in a coma. He dreamt that he opened the door to his mother’s house, and at that moment, his eyes opened and he came out of his coma. Jose’s injury happened when he was

saving a little boy from falling into the garbage ignited with diesel fuel. Jose was burned over 30% of his body and his lung collapsed from the fumes he inhaled. He couldn’t walk for months, and he described the hard work he endured by his physical therapist who pushed him beyond his limits and how small goals were set for him each day to walk a little further than the day before. Jose is one of the warriors

who just re-enlisted for another four years. His mother proudly showed us the pen he was given for re-enlisting.

Bobby, another backpack recipient who was severely burned, came along with his wife and two adorable children. His comrades all had died in an explosion when he sustained his horrific wounds. He has been at Brooke Hospital for a long time, so getting out with his fellow comrades for a few hours was a welcome distraction. We experienced a glimpse into Bobby's life... the many stares he was subjected to, and the comments other kids made who did not understand why he looked the way he did. We had to deal with people's stares for **one evening**.... Bobby and his family will have to deal with this **for the rest of their**



lives. His children will have to endure the cruelty of other kids and they will need to be strong for their father. They were very reserved at dinner and the recovery and healing process is not only for their dad, but for them as well. They are learning about the great sacrifices their father and others have made to keep us all safe.

So each "backpack" tells a story... a life that was almost lost, the struggles one has to endure everyday to push themselves to get stronger and persevere, the new life they will now have to adjust to, the prosthetics, and the scars; emotional and physical. The families behind each "backpack" are also the heroes...the loved ones who

had to stop everything to be by their son's, daughter's, wife's, or husband's side while they undergo hours of physical therapy, and the long road to recovery that they, too, must now endure.

AGC may have played a small part in the recovery of these wounded warriors, but the impact these backpacks have played has had a huge affect on these soldiers moral, knowing that **someone cares** and knowing that they **are not forgotten**. This experience is something we will never forget, and we have a greater appreciation for these men and women who sacrifice their lives to keep us safe.

We were proud to have met these brave young men and women and their families...**each backpack** tells a story of **heroism, sacrifice, courage, and dedication**, but all of them **united in their belief of honor and country**. It is a good feeling to know that AGC Chapters across America joined together to support our American Heroes!