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Mike Jernigan's inspiring journey toward Commencement

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Mike Jernigan and Family

ST. PETERSBURG, FL (May 1, 2012) — Marine Cpl. Michael Jernigan was five weeks from leaving Iraq when an improvised explosive device mangled his right hand and left knee, shattered his entire forehead, destroyed both eyes and left him with a traumatic brain injury.

He thought his life was over. But it had just begun.

The 33-year-old St. Petersburg native would go on to blog about his experiences for the New York Times, appear in a celebrated HBO documentary, “Alive Day,” and transfer from Georgetown University to his hometown university, USF St. Petersburg.

On Sunday (May 6), Mike will achieve a long-delayed dream: He will graduate with a BA in history during Spring Commencement at the Mahaffey Theater.

His wife, Leslie, will receive her BA in psychology during the same ceremonies. And Mike's loyal guide dog, Brittani, will walk with him – wearing a custom-made graduation gown.

For someone who has gone through more pain than the average person can imagine, including 30 surgeries in the first 12 months after he was injured, Mike's attitude is inspiring.

“I look back on it and it’s not a bad thing,” Mike says. “It worked out well. My life now is better than it was before I joined the Marine Corps.”

Mike became a Marine on his 24th birthday, Oct. 18, 2002. “My life really wasn’t going anywhere,” he recalls. “I was just having a good time. I was successfully failing school.”

Like most soldiers, he knew the risks of going to war but “we all leave thinking it won’t happen to me.” He doesn’t remember being wounded, but he does remember the aftermath. “I was just kind of angry,” he recalls.

A divorce would follow, then a new marriage to Leslie, whom he calls “a wonderful woman.” He eventually enrolled at a community college and then transferred to Georgetown University. But Georgetown was difficult too, he says. When he transferred to USF St. Petersburg in August 2009, he was finally home. It was one of the best moves he made, he said, because he found the campus inviting, the students supportive and the faculty challenging but caring. It helps, he says, that all the doors are marked with Braille.

“USFSP welcomed us with open arms,” he says. “People want to help... You thrive in a supportive environment.”

David McMullen, visiting assistant professor of history, had Mike as a student in four different classes. “He’s just an extraordinary fellow,” he said. “The quality of his work is right at the top of my students.” His fellow students, he said, quickly recognized Mike’s unique contributions.

Mike helped start the Paws for Patriots non-profit program through the Southeastern Guide Dogs in Palmetto and has helped place 150 dogs with veterans. After graduation, Mike plans to work as a community outreach coordinator for Southeast Guide Dogs.

But he has other dreams, too, including being mayor of St. Petersburg someday. “It’s just a town I love,” he says.