Communication Is Easy for This Natural-Born Talker

Kasey Richter '09

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Tom Wiggins ’09

Taking off at Linfield

Tom Wiggins ’09 has little memory of his confrontation with death. But the former U.S. Army Airborne Ranger has a new zest for living and has made a nearly full recovery since his three years of military service. But his life changed with the crack of gunfire on May 13, 2004, when he was ambushed and critically injured during a patrol of the high-conflict areas around the world for Evergreen Aviation.

“I have a new appreciation for life,” Wiggins said. “I’ve learned that life is too short and nothing is promised to you so you can’t wait for opportunities to arise. You have to make them.”

Wiggins, born and raised in Gainesville, Fla., was deployed five times to Iraq and Afghanistan during his three years of military service. But his life changed with the crack of gunfire on May 13, 2004, when he was ambushed and critically injured during a patrol of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. He was shot 17 times, including twice in the head, and spent the next two months in a coma.

“I knew something had happened to me but I didn’t know what,” he said. “One day I woke up and couldn’t hear anymore.”

Wiggins used a dry-erase board to communicate during his 18-month recovery at a series of military hospitals. Although the shooting left him deaf, he now has limited hearing thanks to a surgically implanted cochlear device that amplifies sound.

Wiggins, senior leader of Evergreen Defense and Security Services, relocated to McMinnville and resumed the education he set aside for the military. He has found an unexpected camaraderie among Linfield students, faculty and staff and has been particularly impressed by the strong Business Department.

“Everyone at Linfield want to see each other succeed,” said Wiggins, who models his life as a business. “Everything that you do every single day is a part of your business, and depending on how you run that business, you will either succeed or fail.”

In his Linfield classes, a stenographer sits beside Wiggins in the front row, types each lecture and transmits the classroom discussion instantaneously to his laptop screen.

Mike Jones, Harold C. Elkinhton Professor of Accounting, is also a military veteran and has connected with Wiggins on a personal level.

“I feel invested in him and I enjoy having him in class,” Jones said. “He’s a quick wit.”

Besides managing a full course load at Linfield, Wiggins also travels extensively for Evergreen – he logged 85 days last year escorting politicians and celebrities to high-conflict areas around the world. Clients have included former President George H.W. Bush and actor George Clooney.

Deford Smith, owner and founder of Evergreen Aviation and a Linfield College trustee, said Wiggins’ initiative drives his success.

“Tom has demonstrated natural leadership, which is one of the rarest talents on earth,” he said. “Tom has the ability to overcome adversity. These setbacks seem to be a launching pad for him to conceive, believe and achieve.”

Looking ahead, Wiggins hopes to hold public office one day.

“I have a lot I want to do,” he said. “My goal has always been to be in the U.S. Senate by age 32. That may seem very ambitious, but I’ve learned that goal setting is goal-getting.”

— Laura Davis

Communication is easy for this natural-born talker

Aaron Larsen ’08 was born into a family of talkers. Whether he learned it from his grandmother, who told incredible stories, or his grandfather, “a barber with the soul of a poet,” Larsen learned how to keep a conversation going.

“Both my parents are social, especially my mom who likes to chat it up with people,” Larsen said. And it’s clear he got that gene – he can’t go more than five minutes without waving to someone across the room or having a friend stop by to chat.

Larsen, a communication arts major, has parlayed his natural talent into success as a debater and speaker, participating in several tournaments as a member of the Linfield forensics team. He recently placed fourth in the Mahaffey Memorial Tournament, hosted by Linfield.

But he struggled to express himself while studying in Costa Rica his junior year. His host sister, Yuli, helped him overcome obstacles presented by the Spanish language.

“Then I was, a communication arts major, learning how to speak English effectively and persuasively yet when I’m in Costa Rica, I’m outdone constantly by her and her language,” Larsen said. “It became a goal of mine to really learn the language so, in a way, I could compete with her.”

Larsen’s competitive spirit and wide-ranging interests pushed him into film last summer, when he served as a production assistant and actor on a film directed by Kevin Curty ’92 and Devon Lyon ’97. The movie, Age, Sex, Location, deals with the dangers of the Internet. Larsen’s primary responsibility was to check for continuity between scenes of the movie. He also became familiar with copyright issues and removed or hid any products in between scenes of the movie. He also became familiar with copyright issues and removed or hid any products in scenes of the movie. He also became familiar with copyright issues and removed or hid any products in between scenes of the movie.

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“This spring, Larsen is exploring his passion for music with a shared interest, and in this case it is music.”

Linfield has been a perfect fit for Larsen, who has developed deep relationships with classmates, fraternity brothers and professors such as Jackson Miller, his forensics advisor.

“Many of these people have become like family to me,” Larsen said. “The people you find here are the people who genuinely care and who see you not as a number but as a person. They want to see you succeed.”

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