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Interviewee: Chevalier, Keli

Interview Date: January 27, 2014

University of Houston
Oral History of Houston Project
Houston History

Interviewee: Keli Chevalier

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Place: Denny's Restaurant on Southmore, Houston, Texas

Interviewer: Debbie Harwell

Transcriber: Michelle Kokes

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Abstract:

Major Keli Chevalier, the founder of the nonprofit Trauma to Triumph, discusses how she came to join the military to pay for her education and describes her almost twenty-year career that included a tour in Kosovo and two in Iraq. She began her military career demonstrating biomedical equipment and later moved into logistics, responsible for getting U.S. Army service men and women and supplies in and out of the world's trouble spots. She describes coming under fire the moment her plane touched down in Iraq in 2003, being raped by a non-commissioned officer just days later, how that incident impacted her personally, and the Green to gold scholarship that enabled her to finish her degree at the University of Houston. In 2009, she was called up to return to Iraq and she describes how the Army and the war had changed since her first tour, including the shift from IEDs to suicide bombers to attack U.S. troops. After being injured, she had long-needed back surgery and retired from the military.

Upon her return to Houston, Chevalier felt it was critical to address the incidence of PTSD seen in returning troops. While acknowledging the VA tries to address the problem, it lacks the resources, necessitating the private sector to step in. She formed the nonprofit Trauma to Triumph to help women getting out the military transition to civilian life, assisting with a place to live, clothes, food, their children's needs, whatever it takes to get them back on their feet.

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Keli Chevalier

Interviewed by: Debbie Harwell
Date: January 27, 2014
Transcribed by: Michelle Kokes
Location: Houston, Texas

DH: I'm Debbie Harwell and I'm here with Keli Chevalier. We're in Houston, and it is January 27, 2014, and we are going to talk about your career in military and what you are doing today with Trauma to Triumph.

KC: Great, thank you, I'm very honored that you are interviewing me today.

DH: Well, I'm honored as well, and first I want to tell you thanks for serving our country. It is very important particularly in today's world where we are depending on volunteers...

KC: Yeah.

DH: ...to have people who are willing to serve. I just want to say we appreciate that.

KC: Thank you. Thanks for your support.

DH: First let's start with when and where you were born.

KC: I was born here in Houston, Texas 1974. I was born October 21st to Maurice Chevalier, not the Maurice Chevalier [the actor], but Maurice Chavalier III and my mom. Her maiden name is Hightower, Patricia Hightower. So right here; I went to school here. I didn't leave here until I joined the Army.

DH: Oh boy and where did you go to high school?

KC: I went to a few different high schools. I grew up in the Clear Creek District so I went to

Clear Brook High School. Then I noticed that my cousin who was going to Jack Yates High
University of Houston

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School, which was just right down the road [from the interview location], she was getting all kinds of offers to go to school and scholarships, and all kinds of things, and she had a 3.0. Well I had a 3.0, but I was getting nothing. I said, "Well I'm packing my bags. I'm going to Jack Yates." So I actually ended up graduating from Jack Yates High School. I went there one year, and I did get a full ride to Texas Southern University.

DH: Oh good for you.

KC: Yeah, thank you.

DH: So tell me did you always aspire to be in the military?

KC: Absolutely not. If you ask any one of my friends or family members they will tell you this was the most out of character thing I've ever done in my life. Because I was such a girly girl. You know, I had to have my nails done. I had to have my hair down and cute little dresses and bows. No, like I was saying I went to Texas Southern University with a full ride and I flunked out. I flunked out. I lost my scholarship. I had to return back home, and I didn't want to go live at home. I didn't want to stay with mom any more. So I had I joined the Army hoping that I would get more college money. I was initially signed up just to do about ... I think my first contract was six years. I was going to get out and go back to school and six years turned into almost twenty.

DH: Boy! Who recruited you or how were you recruited?

KC: It was crazy because right as I was getting, actually the exact same day that I was getting my grades in the mail I got a phone call from a recruiter, and he said, "You took the ASVAB [Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery test] when you graduated from high school and you scored very high, and I just want to meet with you for a little while and talk with you about your options." I said, "Look, guy, I don't really... I'm not interested unless you can get me some money for school because I cannot live here at my mom's house." Oh my God, that was music

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to his ears! That's exactly what he wanted to hear. He said, "Well come on down let's see what kind of things we've got going on for you."

At the time all I wanted to do was travel the world. I had been studying French and I wanted to speak French and eat French food and sit at a café in Paris. That's all I wanted to do. So I said, "Look can you get me to Paris? I want to go to Paris?" He was like, "Oh sure you can go to Paris. You can be in Paris all the time if you want to." He was just feeding me a bunch of bull. But he said, "You can be a linguist." I said, "Oh great!" So I took the exam to be a French linguist and I was all ready to go. I'm sitting down, I'm getting ready to sign the paperwork, and the guy across the desk tells me, "Well, you realize you have to go airborne to be a linguist?" I was like, "Airborne I don't understand. What are you talking about?" He said, "You're going to have to jump out of planes." I was like, "Jump out.... Oh no. No, no, no, no! Go ahead look up something else for me. I will not be jumping out of a perfectly good airplane. Thank you very much." He said, "Well let's see what else you have here. Because my scores were really high, I could pretty much do anything." I said, "Well give me something in the medical field because I dropped out of pharmacy school and this might make my family happy if I kind of stay in the medical field." So he said, "Well we have biomedical equipment repair tech." "Okay what is that?" "You're going to repair medical equipment." "Great sign me up. I'll take it." So that's what I ended up doing my first almost four years that's what I did. I repaired medical equipment for the Army. It was great. It was a great job!"

DH: Where were you stationed here in the U.S.?"

KC: I was stationed in the U.S. I went to Fitzsimons Army Medical Center, which no longer exists, but it was in Colorado and that's where I went to school for about a year. Then they sent me to Fort Sam Houston because I wanted to be kind of close to home. That was as close as I

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could get to home, Fort Sam, and it's also a medical post so it make sense. There is a big hospital there. So I went there, but I had the opportunity to build some new equipment and I volunteered to be sort of the VIP spokesperson for this equipment. A colonel, my colonel saw me, and he said, "You know what I think you should be an officer." I said, "Really?" He said, "You know what I'm going to do all the paperwork for you." I said, "Okay." He did it. He did all the paperwork for me to go Green to Gold. All I had to do was sign on the dotted line and Green to Gold is a full ride to school. I could go anywhere I wanted to go. So of course I went back home. That's when I went to University of Houston, and I finished my degree, my bachelor's degree. I studied English, which is another something I had always wanted to do. I felt like there were no limits at this point. I just as well do what I really wanted to do. So I studied, my major was in English, and I had a great time. I finished my degree in three years at U of H and I was given a salute and a pin on my rank, and going right back to active duty again.

DH: Oh boy!

KC: Yeah.

DH: So during that three years you didn't... did you have to go to Reserves or something where you had to do training periodically to stay involved? Or you just got to go to school?

KC: I just... I mean, it was school full time. I went to school full time and I did work in the vet affairs center at University of Houston to earn some money but I used my G.I. Bill and I already had all my tuition paid for by the scholarship, but then I also did use the G.I. Bill so I wouldn't have to work. This way I could go to school full time and I could still have money to live off of. So I had a small apartment. And by this time I was a single mom. I had a... I think my son was probably you know two years old at the time. I worked at the vet center and I also went into the Reserves, and I did that for one weekend a month just to earn a little extra money

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there. So that's how I got through it. I had a little small apartment, my son and I. He went to day care and I went to school all day. That's how we made it.

DH: That's a good arrangement.

KC: Yeah.

DH: So then obviously you made a big transition from school to serving overseas. Tell me how that happened.

KC: Talk about transition! I didn't get a whole lot of time. Because when I was graduating in 2000 from U of H the Bosnia/Kosovo conflict (I'm not sure what they titled it) that was going on, so I left U of H. I was sent to Germany and I was stationed at Babenhausen Kaserne in Germany. It's hard to say where it is. Somewhere near Darmstadt. I was selected to lead a group of people, just a small group of people, to go into Kosovo and our job was to run the transition center, basically the combat units that are leaving Kosovo go through us. We provide them everything. We get their manifest for their flights and all that sort of thing. We make sure they have a place to stay and that they are getting food and they are getting rest and then we also accept the combat unit that is coming in. So they are doing a swap. So we are kind of like those folks that are staying in place to help that transition occur. So we did that for about six months, and I left and it wasn't too much longer before 9/11 happened and we were off to Iraq. So, yeah, it was definitely a transition.

DH: So let's talk about that a little bit.

KC: Sure.

DH: Tell me about your experience there. And at some point you must have signed up for longer than the 6 years.

KC: Yes, well once you accept the scholarship...

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DH: The scholarship.

KC: ...then you have signed on for an additional four. But when you are an officer it's not like your contract ends. You have to actually resign your commission.

DH: Your career.

KC: So the clock just keeps going until you give notice that you are ready to transition out of military.

DH: Okay.

KC: So I, at that point, was in it for the long haul because I had already done... you know, I had another four year contract. I had already done four years plus three years of school where I was in the Reserves. I mean I was at 10. I wasn't going to back up at that point. So I knew I was going to go ahead and retire by that point. So we went in. We were the very first unit... one of the very first logistics units to go into Iraq, and it was madness. Because we weren't really prepared. There was nothing, there was no infrastructure there for us, and we were there really building that infrastructure. So what you saw during the surge in 2007, 2008, we were the ones who laid that groundwork. When we went in, literally while we were on the plane wheels down about to hit the runway, we came under a scud missile attack and it was crazy. So it was dead silence on the plane. I mean you could hear a pin drop. Nobody was talking. Nobody was even turning their head. It was just...you could just hear your own heart beat and your own breath. We were told to just stay where we were. It was safer for us to stay in the plane than for us to try to disembark and move to another shelter. So we waited that out.

We got to our little camp site and there was another attack at the victory base where we were. Crazy, because I remember putting on all my gear, the gas mask and the whole green

Martian outfit and the alarms started sounding, and we knew the missiles were coming. Of

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course you don't know if it is going to land on your head or not. I just started running for the nearest bunker. I went to the first one and I looked inside and there was nothing but big bright eyes peeping back at me. It was about, I don't know, fifty pairs of eyes looking back at me. There was no room in there. I said, "Oh no." I ran to the next bunker, looked inside. Same thing. All these eyes. Everyone's silent. Nobody says a word. They are just silent like, "God get me through this." You know. After I ran to the third bunker and I saw the same thing I just laid on the ground and said, "Well Lord this is it. There's no place for me to go." So I just lay on the ground and said, "Okay come what may." That was... you know, that was like, "Welcome to Iraq!"

DH: Nobody said, "Come in we'll make room for you?"

KC: Not a single soul! Not a single soul! They were terrified too, you know. It was packed in there. But nobody was like, "I'm going to move and let you get in." No. None of that. It was packed. But we started going towards our next camp site. Because basically our job was to make sure that the combat units, which were at this time were Marines, had fuel and food and water and that sort of thing to keep pushing closer and closer to Bagdad. So we got in our convoy and headed out and got to ... you've heard of the whole Jessica Lynch situation?

DH: Yes.

KC: Okay we were actually in a convoy trailing hers. We were going to the same destination. And we stopped to refuel and her convoy kept going. Well on the map the road you're supposed to take is like this little dusty trail. You would think it's got to be the wrong road. Right next to it is a hardball road. You're like, "Oh that's probably more like what we're supposed to be on." But they are very, very close. And so we stopped to get fuel and we heard that that road, that

hardball road, the one we thought we were supposed to take was black, which means it's under

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fire. The fuel guys were like, “You know that road’s black, your best bet is to just keep it moving.” Well at the same time a sandstorm of biblical proportion was coming our way. I mean this was like I expected locusts and frogs to come out of it. It was like that. And our S2 which is our intel officer was kind of evaluating the situation and his recommendation was that we went a long way around, risking going through the sandstorm and getting to our destination later than we were supposed to. So our commander agreed with him and said, “Okay that’s what we are going to do.” And it’s a good thing that he did because then we know what happened on that hardball. They were under heavy attack and there were POW’s taken, and deaths and injuries, and all kinds of things. So we decided to push through the sandstorm.

We got stuck. I mean this... we couldn’t breathe. The only way we survived we had baby wipes. That was kind of something we carried with us all the time in our pockets. And we pulled out baby wipes and we put them over our nose and we tried to breathe through that baby wipe. It would kind of capture some of the sand. But it felt like shards of glass in your lungs with every single breath and you just didn’t even want to breathe. It was just like, “I don’t want to breathe. Let me die.” You know? And I thought to myself, again! I’m like, “Really, God?” I mean I’m just going to go out very unceremonious? I’m not going to get any kind of medals or anything! I had a soldier in the truck with me that had asthma and it was everything we could do to try to keep him calm, try to get him to take short breaths, breathe. I didn’t know what to do. There wasn’t much we could do. But we survived that sandstorm. And when it cleared away... you know how people say, “You know the air smelled so sweet.” I know that this is where it comes from because when that sand cleared, it was like honey. I could taste it on my tongue. It was like this air is sweet! It was sweet! We stepped out of the truck so happy to get out of the truck and breathe fresh air and we just sank like up to our knees. We just sank in the sand like quick sand.

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It was like, oh great! If it's not one thing it's another! So we ripped ourselves out of the sand.

Got back in our trucks and we pushed forward some more.

It wasn't another thirty minutes up the road and we came under attack. Saddam's army was waiting for us, and they were behind sand dunes that where they lined the roads. They were everywhere. So they were behind sand dunes, and there was a Marine convoy coming in the opposite direction and they said, "Hey, we just saw this group looks like Iraqi soldiers jump out of a white truck, jump behind these sand dunes. We think they are probably going to ambush you, trying to give you a heads up. Do you want us to stay? What do you want us to do?" Our commander decided that we would just push through as fast as we could. Like just pedal to the metal. All weapons pointed out, fire, fire, fire, and just ... We're going to push through. And at the time that was the smartest thing. I think that was the policy. If we were in the situation, you're not supposed to try to engage really. I mean, remember we are logistics. We're not combat, and people forget that. When we started this war, there was no such thing (and there still isn't) as front line. I mean all units are combat units. There's no such thing as, "Oh I'm in the rear and you're in the front." Especially the logisticians. So that's exactly what we did. We pushed through. We fired; we took fire. There were a couple of injuries but everyone survived and in... there we go, we kept pushing; and I'm telling you it was just one near death experience after another until we finally got to our camp.

We were there about a week and started to have some sense of normality and this was April of 2003, it was beginning of April 2003. I was in my tent one night and one of the senior non-commissioned officers came into my tent and he raped me and there was no... there was no one. And I know people heard. But it was kind of like when you went in that bunker and the eyes are just looking at you but don't move. It was that same sort of thing. And my best friend was out

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there with me. Her name was Marci Hodge, and she said, “Keli, if you don’t report this, I’m going to report it. I’m going to give you give you forty-eight hours to think about what you’re going to do, what’s going on, but if you don’t say something, I’m going to say it.” So the next day, I did report it. I went to the hospital that was out there. They did a test. We collected the evidence and long story short, he ended up being reduced in rank and then discharged from the military with a dishonorable discharge. It did not go to trial because the way the Uniform Code of Military Justice is right now, it doesn’t have to. I mean it can be, and this is also the problem with military sexual trauma in the military, because a person who reports rape in the military, the commander can stop it right there and say, “Okay nice story. Moving on.” Or the commander can take it higher, and even if it goes higher, there’s a level where a lieutenant colonel can decide what the punishment is. It doesn’t actually have to go to trial. So this being a war situation, there really wasn’t even what we call a CID or a Central Intelligence Division. It wasn’t even located where we were because we were in a very remote area. So that’s what happened. He did get punishment you know. I can’t say what he should have gotten, but I am happy that I did report it at that point.

DH: Someone obviously took it seriously which does not...

KC: Some-*one*. It wasn’t many people.

DH: One, because it doesn’t seem that that is the rule from what we are hearing about reports of sexual assault in the military in all branches. Today it seems like we hear more often it’s ignored.

KC: And this is systemic of the Uniform Code of Military Justice and the way it is carried out.

This is what needs to have legislation. This needs to be...it needs to be changed. That court system and that system of punishment needs to be more like how it is as civilians. I totally get, I

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understand why it was set up the way it is. But right now it stands to protect the predator unless there is a one person who's more interested in seeing justice then interested in their career or more interested in seeing the right thing done than he or she is in protecting "the good," background of the perpetrator, which is what happened in my case. You know the lieutenant colonel who made this decision thought, "Well, he's a 'good soldier.'" Quote, unquote... that's what's... "He's a good soldier. He has a good record, he maxes his PT test. You know, he scores highly on his..." like NCO's take some tests. He performs very well, and he was very likable. And most predators are. They come across as one way and they feel they can get away with it and they have that ego that makes them think that it's okay to do whatever they want with whoever they want. I felt like maybe if he had a background that had more blemishes they would have taken it more seriously and maybe the punishment would have been more harsh, it just wasn't the case in this story.

DH: I don't know if you will feel comfortable answering this question or not. But do you think that, I guess I would say, the permissive attitude that we've had towards sexual assault of women has to do with trying to protect the image of the military or the good-old-boy, or does it have to do with people thinking women don't belong in the military?

KC: No, no...

DH: Or just rogue individuals that don't respect others.

KC: I think, well, you kind of have to answer that in a couple of parts. One, women aren't reporting. And I think women aren't reporting because it is like getting raped all over again to report it. What happens is just like in just a regular society let's say you are in school. You are at University of Houston and someone gets raped. Well then so-and-so is going to tell so-and-so, and they are going to have their side of the story and the predator is going to have his side of the

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story and he's going to tell so-and-so. Then everybody's talking; and then the ones that are on this side are in your face, and the ones that are on this side... that's just people. Then you couple that with a system that is protecting the predator, and so for me it was, "Tell your story. Okay tell it again. Tell it again, tell it again, tell it again, tell it again...because we're waiting for you to change some part of your story. So tell it again and again and again." And then they threaten you. "Well we're going to test this and we're going to test that." And "We're going to give you a lie detector test." "Do it." That's what I'm saying. "Do it, so we can get this over with." But they make you want to give up and it is not easy to get through it. You know that your reputation and your career is on the line just by reporting it. So that's the first part. It doesn't get reported because it's horrible to report it.

Then secondly once it is reported, there...once it is reported and you are going through that whole trial, you know when it's all said and done it may never get to trial. It may never get to a jury of your peers or his peers. It may not get to a jury of his peers and you've gone through all of that for one lieutenant colonel who was, whose name came up on the list to say, "This is what he gets." And so you're like, "Really? So I've gone through all of that and now he walks away with, okay, you took a rank away from him?" Which he will get back because if you stay in the military long enough you are going to make and lose rank all the time. Or worse, nothing happens. Then you start questioning. "Okay was it me? Did I say something? Did I do something? Could I have changed this?" There were moments where I had to tell my story so many times that I started to wonder if I was telling the truth. I questioned... I said, well they are asking, they are interrogating me and I'm like... I don't know. Was this a dream or was this real? Did this happen to me? You know, you feel, you're almost like, "Well I don't even know

anymore." And you just so badly want to forget the whole thing and move on with your life that

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you are willing to just say, “You know what, my bad. I was wrong. Can I just get my life back?”

I think it takes a tremendous amount of support from your friends and your family to be able to get through it. I was one of the lucky ones because I had that. My very best friend was out there with me. I communicated with my mom. I wrote letters. I wrote to my congresswoman, and I had support. Had I not had that support, I think I may not be here. I think I may not be able to sit here and have this conversation with you today. That’s the truth.

DH: How did that impact how other people you knew worked with you on a daily basis there?

KC: It was horrible. It was horrible. People didn’t want to work with me. I had to pretty much do my own investigating. Like I had to get my own people to... I had to find someone who could say they heard something, and nobody wanted to get involved, because the investigators didn’t. They weren’t even trying. So people shunned me. They didn’t want to talk to me. They didn’t want to work with me. They just absolutely didn’t want to get involved whatsoever. And I was taken out of my position, which I brought 300 soldiers to Iraq. I was their commander because, I was their acting commander, our actual commander had some other things going on. So I trained these guys. I prepared these guys. I got these guys out there and I felt that I was responsible for them. When this happened I was taken out of that role, and it was basically like, “Sit here and work with these people.” And it wasn’t even people in my unit. These were reservists that I never met before, that I did not know, and they gave me busy work and they didn’t want me to touch their stuff. They didn’t want me to do anything at my grade level. So I spent the rest of that time trying to make a friend basically. Trying to make a friend. It was really hard. It was really hard.

DH: I can’t imagine.

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KC: When I left I went back to Germany and I was, oh my God, I felt like a weight had been lifted off me. But once I got back I kept having nightmares; I kept seeing this guy that raped me. I saw him everywhere. Even though in my mind I kept saying, "No he's not here. He can't possibly be here. He's not here. But I saw him everywhere. I would dream and I would see his shadow and it was choking me and I couldn't breathe sometimes. I was alone because I came back before the rest of my unit did because I had to go to the captain's career course. So I had to leave early, a little bit early to go do that. So the rest of my unit, everybody else was still in Iraq. And it was just me. No family. My son was with my mom here in Houston. My best friend had already gone ahead of me to the career course and I was by myself trying to figure out what to do with myself. And it was a challenge but I kept... I wanted to see my son and I kept wanting to keep it together long enough to see him and when I got back to the states I mean I was just so happy.

Then, ironically, in my captain's career course was the convoy commander of the Jessica Lynch convoy. He was there. And not only that but we had this huge debriefing about what had happened with that incident and it was basically the full investigation disclosed to all of us. The people giving the presentation didn't know that the convoy commander was actually in the room. They began giving their opinion, their personal opinion about what happened and it was brutal and part of me was like, "You know what I had a horrible experience there. But this guy... his experience is not only just ... he experienced it but it's been documented, it's been dissected, it's been memorialized. This is now his legacy." I thought, "Things can always get worse." So you know? So I... it was tough. It was a tough experience.

DH: Well it's certainly... I'm going to go from Trauma to Triumph in a minute but, it's certainly obviously enables you to help others in ways that nobody else could.

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KC: I believe that. I believe that I have gone through so many things. My... the reason I was a single mom my husband was abusive. I got out of that situation. You know then the issues in Iraq, I had a nervous breakdown by the time I went to Japan. I was engaged to be married and my fiancé left me at the altar. And I'm like, "Why, Lord, why?" So I had a complete meltdown and ended up doing another tour in Iraq. More bombs, more explosions. Now closer to home. Now closer I can feel the _____ (34.40) So all this is going on, and I'm like, "Okay I don't know why." But now I do. Now I know.

Now I know that I survived all of that and there are people who don't. Because suicide happens once an hour from PTSD. So every hour someone gives up because they don't know how to get through it. They don't know or don't have the support or they don't have the will. I really believe they just don't know. They are asking, "What am I supposed to do now?" And they don't get an answer. So I feel like I've gone through all these different things and I made it, and now I can repeat that with other people. I can help them. I can say, "Okay here's where I was. This is what I did. This is what I said. This is where I went. This is who I talked to and you can do the same thing." Because all those things that were taken from me and when I say "things" I'm talking about bits and pieces of myself. My identity, my joy all these things in me that were taken I got back 100 fold. I mean I've gotten it all back, everything. So it's a process. You've just got to know that these feelings, these thoughts... this cacophony of sounds and all these things that are going on in your head that you are like, "It's going to be over. It's temporary. It's just temporary." If you can get through all of that, your life is going to be so much better. It's exactly like getting out of that sand-storm and the air is so sweet. It's exactly like that. So it's been sort of a metaphor for my life.

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DH: Well what... I want to ask you just one more question about your military career just to basically document it for the purposes of interview. Then I want to move to more questions about the PTSD and what you are doing today.

KC: Sure.

DH: So when was your first tour in Iraq? What years?

KC: That was 2003.

DH: And then you were in Germany for a while.

KC: Yes.

DH: Then did you come back home for a period or you went to Japan?

KC: Right so I was in Iraq from 2003 to 2004 and then when I returned I went back to Germany just to wait until my course started at Fort Lee, Virginia. So then I flew back to the states, I went to Fort Lee and I went through that course. As soon as I finished that course, I went to Japan. So in Japan is where you know I had a nervous breakdown. But I also met my current husband there, and he's amazing. And he..

DH: So it's a good thing you didn't marry the other guy, huh?

KC: Thank you. Yes, it's a wonderful thing. He is a great father and a great husband. He is there for me and he is supportive. He cooks great Pilipino food and he's just cute. And then we have a seven-year-old boy together. He has really helped me get through this and he understands that PTSD is real and PTSD is severe at times and then at times, you forget you have it. And he gets me.

DH: That's good!

KC: Yeah, that's what I love about him.

DH: That's good. That's important. Was he in the Army too?

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KC: No, actually, my boss when I was in the Army in Japan hooked me up with him. He was my boss's brother-in-law and he came from the Philippines to visit in Okinawa. He [the boss] had a party, and he said, "Chevalier, I want you at my party. My in-laws are coming in and I want to invite you." Of course my boss invited me to his party so, you know, you've kind of got to go. And come to find out the whole thing was just to hook us up.

DH: Oh, wow, that's neat!

KC: The whole thing!

DH: Well he obviously had good sense, huh?

KC: Yes, he's a very, very wonderful man, too. My former boss, now my brother-in-law, he's actually serving in ... not Kuwait but Qatar (or Qatar or however you pronounce it, it's Qatar, yes) so that's where he is now.

DH: Okay, so when was your second tour that you did?

KC: Well when I left Japan I joined the Reserves because I wanted to spend more time with my little son, my new one. So I joined the Reserves and I decided I would start an interior design business. So I did that here in Houston. It's called Chevalier Interiors and it did very well. And then I got called to go back to Iraq and that was in 2009. So in 2009, I went back over there and things were totally different. I mean totally. It wasn't the vast wasteland it was before. Lots of buildings, lots of things built but the biggest change was the bombings. Where at first we had some scud missile attacks, we had some small fire but this was, this was unheard of. And you know after doing some research to verify this, Iraqis had no idea what a suicide bomber was until we got there. It hadn't even been invented. There wasn't even such a thing until Americans arrived. It had never even happened before. So when we were there in 2003, there were little improvised bombs....

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DH: The IEDs...

KC: The IEDs, Improvised Explosive Device and that is ... it was like a little remote control and they would kind of hide it in bags or under trash or something and you know it would blow up the vehicle. Well, by this time in 2009, who needs an IED anymore? We don't need an IED, now we have a suicide bomber who can go in strapped with tons, tons of explosive and take out this whole block. We'll rig this bus or this car or multiple cars. So it had evolved tremendously by the time I went again.

DH: So is that how you were injured?

KC: No, I was born with scoliosis, and I was injured in Iraq but it was just from carrying a bunch of equipment and all that kind of thing; and then there was a bus bomb that exploded near us and it caused that my... I was by my wall locker and my wall locker fell and hurt my back. So when I got back, I went through the process to fix my back basically. So they ended up fusing my spine and that's how, that's why I have the whole long scar. So it was sort of like, "Well you were injured. You had this thing happen. We can fix that a little bit but we are going to just go ahead and fix the whole thing." So my scoliosis is corrected and now I have it straight as an arrow and I'm titanium reinforced and ready to go. So stronger than ever now.

DH: So that is a picture of your back on the website?

KC: Yes.

DH: I wondered if it was you.

KC: You know, I get a 50/50 kind of reaction to that photo from women. Some women are like, "I think it's amazing." You know, "I think it's strong. It's beautiful." Then I get some women who say, "Why are you nude? Why are you standing there with no clothes on?" I always tell them, "Well had the scar been on my knee I guess I would have shown my knee but it just

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happens to be on my back.” And because of the surgery you have to really stay strong or the muscles atrophy and it causes a lot of pain. It actually is more painful not to work out and to stay in bed then it is to get up and do something every day. So I thought this is where my scar is and you can’t really see it unless I take my shirt off. You can’t do it. I tried to be tasteful.

DH: So do you ask them, “Why do you see it as a nude woman? Why do you not see the scar on my back?”

KC: I do ask them. I do and they just don’t have a reply for me. I ask them. I said, “This scar represents that you can be scarred. You can be wounded. You can have scars that you can’t see, but you can still be strong, and you can still be beautiful. And you can still be proud of who you are.” That’s what it is to me. That’s... when I took the picture that’s what I wanted to convey, that message.

DH: I think it conveys that to people who are open to reading that message obviously. If all you see is somebody without her clothes on then you aren’t thinking about the message. That’s how I get it.

Okay, I want to ask you first generally the question that we talked about on the phone, about why you think we have more PTSD in this conflict. Or are we hearing about it more? Those two ... is that an accurate description? Then I want you to tell me about Trauma to Triumph and how you are working to address this need that is created.

KC: Okay, sure. So let’s go back to 2012. So the VA received about 65,000 claims for PTSD in 2012 and those claims went all the way back to World War II, so PTSD is not new. It has a new name. I think before we might have called it “shell shocked” or you know something like this. But it’s all, it’s been around. And when you really think about what PTSD is, which is

basically any prolonged exposure to a traumatic situation, so near death situations, or if you think

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about Katrina and people were homeless and living in the dome and all of that prolonged exposure to things that are traumatic to you. That is all PTSD. And it couples with several symptoms. So you will have nightmares, isolation, depression, anxiety... PTSD is basically if you are not living the life you were living. You were going out and you were doing things and you were happy, and now you are no longer doing those things, you probably are suffering from PTSD. So I think what has happened now and why we know more about it now... of course there are studies. First of all, I think we are in a time where there has been sort of this paradigm shift. People now look at a soldier as a human being and not a bullet stopper. We look at soldiering as this is your career, and you are doing something heroic for us and we want you to be safe. We want the best for you. Where, say, in Vietnam it wasn't the case. It was more like, "Well this is your choice. This is something... you are expendable." Soldiers aren't expendable anymore. But that also means the reason soldiers aren't expendable is because they are smarter and they are smarter, which means they have jobs today that are more technically savvy and they probably come from homes that are a little more cushioned and a little more nurturing than we had before. Because parenting has changed. You know everything is evolving. So now what you are getting in basic training (mostly, this might be an over generalization) but mostly you are getting these new kids in there that are sort of the "I want it now. I want it now." We call them the blue ribbon generation. Because they sort of feel like, "No matter what I do I should still get a ribbon for it."

DH: True.

KC: It's okay if I come in last place I'm still going to get something." So when you go into war with that mentality it's not really, it's not conducive to traumatic experiences. So let's take a kid let's say from Houston, Texas, who his mom and dad have been telling him he's the smartest

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thing and he's the best kid in the world. And he's so awesome. For whatever reason he joins the military. It used to be once he got into boot camp, the drill sergeant would strip all of that away, just strip it. Break you down. You are feeling like you are nothing and then they build you back up again into a soldier. No longer that way. Now you go to basic training. You don't feel like running? It's okay; don't run. You can jog, you can walk. You don't want to carry that? That's okay, don't carry that. You're going to be okay. We love you. Nobody loved me in basic training. It is kinder. It is gentler and they do that because soldiers aren't as expendable. They are putting a lot of money into these kids—a lot of money. These guys they spend a million dollars going through all of their education. We've got to make sure that these kids stick around and stay in. So we can't have them cracking up and leaving us in basic training and we've wasted all of this money and time and effort and energy. So what happens? Here is the kid that thought he was just going to get in and he was going to get some college money. Or maybe he really felt, post 9/11, "I want to do something for my country and this is meaningful to me." And he goes in with that attitude, which is very noble, very noble. And he goes in, but he hasn't gotten that broken down stuff. Now he gets into war where it's real. It's not the video game he's used to. It's not the graphics that he's used to. It's real people, real gunfire that rings in your head and rattles around for a while. It is the real... your real buddies are not making it. Your real friends are not coming home and it is when you are folding that flag, when it sets in and you are just like, "Wait a minute, so they are not coming back? We don't get another player? We don't get to re-up?" "No the person's not coming back." Not only that, they go for that one tour and this is their job now. And they go back again for another tour. This war has been going on eleven years, twelve years. So there are kids out there who have done this maybe six times. Six times... so when I talk about what is PTSD, prolonged exposure? You are already having prolonged exposure if you go

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one time. If you go six times, you have prolonged exposure and you are probably not taking the time to address those issues in between and its building and its building.

One thing about being a soldier/sailor/airman/marine, it's all the same. You are pretty much taught that you are a team and you are an important part of that team. So if you remove me the team suffers. You don't want your team to suffer, so you keep going in and you keep going back, and even though you are hurting, you don't say anything. So you are not getting the treatment. Sometimes they may force you to get some little slide presentation that says what PTSD is and you should call this number if you are ever feeling suicidal. That's great, but it's really checking the block. It's not really digging in to that person.

So you take a kid who has never experienced anything like this in his or her life, they get out there multiple times and now they are on their way home. Their family members don't understand what's going on. And even if they do understand the person feels like they don't understand. I felt that way when I came back. I was like, "Look at all these people driving around like they are just free to drive around." I was so angry. I was like, "Look at them! They are not running over camels. They don't have to pee in the bag in the back of the truck. Look at all these people that just don't even get it." You know, have no clue how good they have it. And that makes you angry and you are... and it builds and it builds and it builds and it builds until you get to a point where you are like, "That's it I can't take this anymore. I'm better off dead. I don't want to be here. I'm done." And they check out and that's it. And it really takes someone in their corner that can understand that when they are screaming in the middle of the night that they are living it. It's when you are having that nightmare, you are living it. You are literally there. Your mind is there. Your body may be here but your mind, your touch, your taste, your sight, your hearing, all of it is still there. Unless somebody is rubbing your back saying, "It's

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going to be okay. It's going to be okay. I'm here for you. I'm here for you. I'll make a place for you and you can hide in this place and you can stay there until you are ready to come out."

Unless somebody is doing that for you, you are in another world and it's very hard to accept this world when you've been in that world for so long. It's very difficult. So the numbers keep rising.

They don't have the support. They are not getting the help. They are not knowing what to do.

Sadly every hour someone commits suicide from PTSD.

DH: When you say that do you mean in the general population or do you mean former military?

KC: The general population. Because when you are talking about PTSD, a lot of people think it looks like the guy with the tan colored helmet on and he's got his weapon, he's got the backpacks and all kinds of gear and he's all geared up, right? They think, "Oh that guy. And he could have PTSD." And they never think that it could be the quiet girl that is in your classroom and she's been molested for five years (or longer) and she can't talk about it. And she doesn't know who she is going to go to. They never think that that face is also the face of PTSD. So a lot of people get forgotten and again they fall in that crack and end up committing suicide. So what Trauma to Triumph does is try to fill those gaps. So we look at the whole picture. We look at the whole demographic of people and for Trauma to Triumph we focus on women. The only reason we do that is because there are a lot of organizations that want to help. But they still ... if you look at Wounded Warriors or something like this ... they still have that image of men, and I wanted to create something that really talked and spoke to women and the way that they needed to be spoken to and people understood.

So women talking to women. Veterans helping veterans. Then we have Trauma to Triumph. and we really target veteran women who are just transitioning out. We feel like if we

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can capture them in that first ninety days, before they run out of all of their money. Before their leave days are used up and their benefits have run out and right before they got on the brink of, “Oh, crap, I don’t know where I’m going or what I’m doing, and I don’t have a job yet.” That’s when we step in and we’re like, “It’s going to be okay because we are going to take care of you.” Because we are basically going to extend the life you had in the military. We are going to extend those benefits for you. And we are going to make sure that you have housing. And we are going to make sure that you get counseling that you need, job training and job placement, and we are going to take care of you up to a year, and then we transition you to another organization that makes sure you have those things. But we are never going to just drop you or leave you or abandon you. The VA does their part. They really do. They really do, but they are overburdened. Out of the females, there were over 6,000 VA claims filed in 2012 for females with PTSD.

DH: And that’s Houston or that...?

KC: Right here. Out of that 6,000 1% were actually compensated -- 1%. So that tells me that yes you can go to the VA and get counseling. But if you are not getting compensated that means you are not getting that monthly check that’s helping you to get to the next point. Then on top of that you are going through all of your anxiety and depression and all of those things and you are a woman. So nine times out of ten you are taking care of your kids and you’re trying to take care of what they are going to eat. And sometimes these women feed their kids before they feed themselves. So kids are going to school and getting a meal. Mom is trying to figure out what to do next. So Trauma to Triumph says, “We’re going to take you out of all of that and we’re going to take all of that trauma that you experienced and we’re going to turn that into your new treasure. We are going to make that into something you can prosper from. We are going to turn that into your triumph, redesign your life.

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DH: That's great. And as I said earlier you can speak from personal experience on a number of different levels.

KC: Yes.

DH: You know from the rape experience and from the combat experience and the being left at the altar experience. I mean all of it. Every bit of it, all of those things are traumatic. Any one of those things would be traumatic.

KC: Yes.

DH: For a person ... and here, look at what a success you are making out of all of that!

KC: Thank you, I'm glad you say that because when people define success it can be defined many, many different ways. I feel successful because I'm still here. I feel like I have made it through all of those things and I'm still here, which means I still have a mission. Which means I'm still useful. I'm still purposeful and I can still help someone and to me that is my definition of success and a lot of times people look at me and they are like, "No way.... No way." But it has been a process and I feel like anyone can do it. It takes the right support. A little time. A lot of prayer. But, yeah, I think anybody can do it.

DH: So is there anything that we haven't talked about or that I haven't asked about that you'd like to include?

KC: I think that sums it up!

DH: Okay, are you still a girly girl?

KC: Oh my God, am I! I will have to send you a picture of my closet, which was formally known as my oldest son's bedroom, now known as my girlie room. Or my girl cave. Yes, I am. I love it. I love fashion. I curate fashion.

DH: That's good.

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KC: That's what makes me happy. So my motto is, "Buy the damn shoes!"

DH: It takes a woman to understand that. You realize that, don't you?

KC: Absolutely I know, I know. So I'm like, life is too short. It's just too short. It's too short to do anything that doesn't make me happy, make me better, or make me money!

DH: That's good. Well thank you.

KC: You're welcome. Thank you!

End of interview

