

NOTES FROM THE FILMMAKER

RICHARD HANKIN – Director, Producer, Writer & Editor

HOME FRONT began with a simple question: *What happens when America's wounded come home?* I've long been a fan of the 1946 film "The Best Years of Our Lives," which follows veterans of WW II as they return home to their families. The initial idea for **HOME FRONT** was to do a documentary version of that story, with veterans returning home from the war in Iraq. Who were these men and women behind the statistics? How were they and their families coping with their return?

Soon after I starting researching the subject, I came across a mention of the Wounded Warrior Project, a non-profit group that offers support and assistance to wounded soldiers returning home. I met with the founder of the group, John Melia, a former marine wounded in 1992 outside of Somalia. John mentioned that he was organizing an event in New York City, a public speaking seminar aimed at helping wounded soldiers feel more comfortable telling their stories. He invited me to come and take a look.

That event, in August of 2004, was the beginning of the production phase of **HOME FRONT**. There, I met Jeremy Feldbusch and his mother, Charlene. I was immediately taken by their circumstance and relationship. Until recently, Jeremy had been a highly capable Army Ranger; now his mother accompanied him everywhere, and had to help him with even simple tasks. When it was time for a bathroom break, Charlene led Jeremy into the ladies room – having already learned that it was easier to explain the presence of a blind man in a ladies room than her presence in a men's room.

In September, I drove with my cameraman to Jeremy's house in Blairsville, Pennsylvania. We met Jeremy's two brothers and his father, and started to explore the small town in which the family lived. At this point, I was still thinking that I would follow three separate soldiers over the course of a year, and that Jeremy would be one of them. That plan did not last long. I soon realized that in order to develop a meaningful relationship with the film's subjects, and "dig in" to their day-to-day reality, I was going to have to focus in on one family. Thousands of soldiers had been injured in Iraq. This would be one family's story.

From the beginning, in discussions with the Feldbuschs, I made it clear that I was not out to advance any particular political agenda, but rather wanted to let the family tell their own story, in their own voice. There was a mutual trust and understanding – the issue of wounded soldiers transcended politics. Throughout the entire filmmaking process, I tried to be as unobtrusive as possible, and let the story reveal itself.

One revelation came a couple of months into shooting, when Jeremy mentioned that he was getting excited about his preparations for the upcoming deer-hunting season in Pennsylvania. At the time, I did a double take – a blind man hunting? Ultimately,

however, the story of Jeremy going hunting with his father became a kind of film within a film, as Jeremy and Brace acted out a father-son ritual that neither was willing to give up on account of Jeremy's injury.

As Jeremy continued to recover, he became more involved with the Wounded Warrior Project, traveling to various events and bonding with other wounded soldiers. Ultimately, the group goes to Washington, D.C. to lobby for legislation to ease the incredible financial strain faced by those with serious injuries returning home. Throughout, these soldiers struggle to recover from devastating injuries while at the same time, they are determined to make it easier for those who follow in their footsteps.

In the end, **HOME FRONT** allows room for the audience to decide for themselves on where they stand on the critical issues raised in the film. The strength of the material is that it is "real life" and not a neat fictional package. So the story is rife with nuance, complexity and at times contradiction. Ultimately, though, I am hopeful that viewers will be touched by this one family's struggle and inspired by their love and determination.