A Soldier's Story: Christopher Safulko ’13 Went from Amherst to Afghanistan and Back

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Christopher Safulko ’13 went from Amherst to Afghanistan and back

One of the first things that new law students learn is the importance of the rule of law — the ancient ideal that everyone in a society should be governed by the same laws and the same application of those laws.

It’s a lesson with special resonance for Christopher Safulko, who graduated this year from SUNY Buffalo Law School. Safulko entered the Law School immediately on the heels of a career as an active-duty Army officer, with extensive experience as part of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan.

As a result of that experience, he says, “I have a different perspective than many people, because I see what’s at stake. I spent time in a place where the state of nature is in play. Where I was in Afghanistan, there was no rule of law. I saw how people behaved and what happens when you don’t have confidence in your ability to petition the government.

That bolsters or validates my decision to go into the practice of law, because I understand how important the integrity of the system is.”

The story of Safulko’s service in Afghanistan is one of several interlocking narratives in a best-selling book from last year, The Outpost: An Untold Story of American Valor by Jake Tapper, now a CNN anchor. The book tells of the battles to defend Combat Outpost Keating in Afghanistan’s Nuristan province from attacks by Taliban insurgents. Safulko served as an executive officer and scout platoon leader there, and was wounded by shrapnel (which he still carries in his leg) when a recoilless rifle round struck a Humvee and exploded on the ground near him and other soldiers. For his service, Safulko was awarded the Purple Heart and the Bronze Star.

Tapper called him in 2010 and subsequently conducted multiple interviews, followed by a two-year process of fact-checking to get the story right. “I’m happy with what he did,” Safulko says. “He included the human side. We talk a lot about the cost of the war in dollars and cents, but what it costs in human terms is less told. I feel lucky that my story was incorporated and was told. Everybody who was out there over those three to four years is fortunate in that respect.”

He still has a soldier’s reticence to tell his own story, but has made an exception when speaking out about veterans issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder and the high suicide rate among military members. “It’s a difficult experience to rehash these things over and over again,” Safulko says. “But if I’m educating the public by telling my story again, I’ll do it. It’s important to know what kinds of conditions existed out there. . . .”

It was slow down. His final day of active duty was followed straightaway by the first day of SUNY Buffalo Law School orientation. “I was used to being very, very active all the time,” he says. “The sedentary lifestyle of sitting in class and studying so many hours a day was hard. I had more time to think about everything that had happened in the past few years.”

The decision to enroll in SUNY Buffalo Law, says Safulko, who grew up in Amherst, was in one way an effort to find a new way to serve. “When I came back, in 2009, I knew I was ready to do something else,” he says. “Everything I had joined the Army to do, I had done. And I decided this wasn’t for me anymore. I still want to serve the public, still want to serve my community, but there are other ways to do it.” A law degree, he recognized, would give him the freedom to live anywhere he wants, the skills to earn a living, and the latitude to do whatever pro bono work seems to him most helpful.

About half of his Law School costs have been paid through the GI Bill, he says, and by graduating with substantially less debt than he might have at a private law school, he has the freedom to pursue his professional interests.

At SUNY Buffalo Law, he has been part of the Trial Technique team and Moot Court Board. He has also served as a summer law clerk with the U.S. Attorney’s office, had an externship as a law clerk with the Erie County district attorney’s office, and most recently worked as a law clerk at the Buffalo law firm Hogan Willig, where among other matters he worked on wrongful-incarceration cases.

“To stay in shape, Safulko does a lot of running. It fits with the pace of his life. “I feel,” he says, “like I haven’t stopped moving in seven years.”