

MR. J.R. MARTINEZ: Thank you. It is so
nice to be greeted by all of you incredible
Carpenters.

(Disruption from the delegation.)

Jim said if you say that, you're going
to get booed. And I was, like, well, I'm going to
say it because I just have to come up here and just
kind of, you know, ruffle the feathers a little bit.

But, no, it's a pleasure to be here

with all of you this morning to have the opportunity to just share a little bit about my life and what I have experienced and how, essentially, I have gotten to this point. Which I think a lot of people still have a tendency at times to scratch their head and wonder, how did you get, what I like to say, from hospital to Hollywood to some degree.

And you know there's all of these different things. I mean, we live in a society now where, especially if you're on social media, when you're scrolling through, I mean you're going to see people that are gonna be like, do these three things, this one thing, these two things, these five things, right? And I can sit here and pitch all of these different things that have contributed to me getting here today, but I think the biggest thing, without a doubt, underlining that has been a consistent thing over the last 20 years since I was injured, was my willingness to be vulnerable.

And that is a tough word. And I'm not going to, you know -- I'm not going to sit here and just say just for men, I'm going to say for everybody. I think the term "vulnerability" is something that maybe for some of us causes us to

have a little bit of, you know, jitters and anxiety or panic or whatever term you want to utilize. But a lot of times I don't think a lot of us understand what even vulnerability means.

You know, and I was talking to the gentleman that just was on the stage in the green room and, you know, he's 24 years in. He's in the National Guard and, you know, he's an officer and he's doing his thing and, you know, and he's talking about how I just have so much to give and I feel like I can't -- I can't step away from it. I just have that much more to give. And he's like I might go for 30. I just think to myself, wow, I remember that feeling when I was 19 years old and I just enlisted in the United States Army.

You know, when I raised my right hand like so many men and woman have done -- and I know that there's a lot of service members in the audience and family members. When I raised my right hand, I understood that war was a possibility but I never thought it would be my reality. And I think most of us can relate to that sentiment.

Listen, I'm 19 years old as well. I'm very naive, nothing is going to happen to me, you

know, everything is okay, right? I'm 19 years old.

And how many of us have essentially maneuvered through life where we see adversity and challenges being introduced to people either in our communities, in our states, in our country, around the world, and how many of us will pause and actually maybe share it on social media or like or comment? Or maybe some of us will pause and actually say a prayer. But then guess what, we move on with our day. We get back to our lives. Just get back into it.

Because even though we know things, it's a reality, life is really unpredictable, it's very fragile, even though we know things could happen, we don't really think it's gonna happen. And so then you compile that with being 19 years old and having really no experience or anything. I'm incredibly naive.

Like I said, I thought I was going to do three years, get in, get out. It was an opportunity for me. I joined right after 9/11. I graduated the year after.

Now this wasn't something that -- you know, my mother -- my mother instilled a lot of

things in me. My mother has experienced a lot of trauma. I grew up essentially feeling the aftermath of all of that trauma. My mother never dealt with that trauma. So, unfortunately, she developed these really unhealthy ways of managing as best as she could. And despite all of those challenges, there is one thing that my mother did for me that I don't think she even really intended to do. It was just something she did.

Now when we talk about leadership -- and as I was walking in, I see the big banner, Leadership, Empowering the Future. And when I think of leadership, right, it's not just individuals that are in a position where they in an organization. Like the organization can easily be at home as well. That's an organization in itself.

And so my mother was the leader. My father wasn't in my life. It was just my mother and I, so she was the leader of the house. And she is 4 foot, 11. Even though we had a debate about that one time. She argued that she was 5 feet tall. And I said, no, you're not. You're 4 foot, 11.

And it just so happened in the space we were in there was one of those scales where you

can stand on and, you know, you bring the thing down to the head and whatnot. I said, well, let's settle this right now, Mom. And so she goes and she stands on it and she is 4 foot, 10. I was like, see, you should have taken the 4 foot, 11. You got greedy.

(Laughter.)

But I remember, you know, I grew up in -- I was born in Louisiana. I moved to Arkansas when I was 9 years old and I grew up there and, listen, Arkansas was difficult for me. It was a challenge. I didn't feel like I was a part of a community. I didn't feel like I belonged. I didn't feel, like, welcomed. It was a difficult space for me.

And what I realized once I got into my 30s, because I'm 40, but once I got into my 30s and I started doing therapy and all of these things and unpacking all of this stuff and peeling back the onion, as they say, I realized that my entire life all I have been looking for is a space to feel like I belong. A space to feel like I can be embraced and accepted, be a part of something.

So Arkansas wasn't that for me. It was difficult. It was challenging. And I remember

asking my mother throughout my childhood if we could leave Arkansas, if we could go back to Louisiana. She said, No, no, no. Great job here. This is home for us.

And at the end of my junior year my mom said, Well, I have a friend that lives in a small town in Georgia called Dalton. What do you say if we go for like a little vacation? And so we took the drive to Dalton, Georgia. We're hanging out for about three or four days. My mom is catching up with her friend having a good time. What am I doing? I'm actually having my mom's friend's kids drive me around town because I'm looking at the schools and there's three schools in that area. And I'm checking out the schools. I'm scouting.

As we get back into the car and we're getting ready to drive back to Arkansas, my mom says, So what did you think about it? And I said, I loved it. I was great. It was amazing. It was this. It was that. I said, Well, what did you think about it, Mom? She's like, I loved it as well. And I'm thinking to myself, Oh, this is going in the direction I want it to go in. Okay.

So at what point am I going to ask the question? So of course there was no time that was better than in that moment. And I just said, So if you liked it and I liked it, can we move? And she said, No. And I said, Why not? She said, Because you're going into your senior year of high school. I have great job. No.

So we get back to Arkansas. My mother goes and lays down and takes a nap for a couple hours. She wakes up and she comes into the living room and she sees me standing on the couch holding a picture frame that I had just taken off of the wall. She says, What are you doing? I said, I'm packing. She said, Packing? What do you mean you are packing? Where are you going? I said, We're moving to Georgia. And she says, No, we're not. We talked about this. I said, Hold on, mom. While you were sleeping I figured it all out. I got a plan.

And here is where that beautiful lesson comes into play. My mother's willingness even though she was dead set on it was a no, it was a hard no, it's not going to happen, she was still willing to sit down and listen to me. She was still willing to put herself right in front of me and say,

Okay, tell me about this plan that you have.

And I didn't think, Well, why am I wasting my time? You're going to say no anyway. No. I just said, Okay. I'm going to tell her. And this is all I could come up with. I said, Mom, it's the summertime. Why don't I go to Georgia for two weeks and within those two weeks, I'll try to get a job. But let's say if I'm doing well in one month, if I'm doing well in one month, then you have to move to Georgia. She says, What happens if you are not doing well in two weeks or if you're not doing well in a month? I said, Well, then I'll come back to Arkansas, graduate from high school and we won't talk about the moving thing until I'm done with school. She said, Deal.

I didn't tell my mother I need to leave Arkansas because my life is being threatened. I feel unsafe. My mother didn't know a lot of the stuff that I was dealing with outside of the house because I didn't want to tell her because my mother is a 4 foot, 11 Latina. Like you piss her off, be careful, like, watch out.

(Laughter.)

And everybody -- and listen, there

were things that I could get into that I was dealing with outside of the house. And I knew that if I told my mother, my mother was going to try to find everybody and just try to fight everybody. And the only real way I can explain my mother to you is if you have been in the military or around it or if you've seen a movie, all of us have seen a grenade. Either you've held one in real life or you've seen it in person or you've seen it on seen in TV but we understand a grenade you can hold in your hand.

And I remember when I was doing training, I remember one day they put this grenade in my hand and they sort of gave us a direction. We stand up. We're standing behind this bunker. We stand up. We throw it. After we throw it, we get back down. So I hold this grenade. I throw it and I get down. But because I'm a naturally a curious individual, I got back up because I wanted to see what that thing was really going to do. And that little thing that I was just holding went boom. And I'm, like, that's my mom right there. That's my mom. That little thing right there. You got three seconds from the moment you pull that pin to get away before she goes off. So my mother had no

idea the things that I had been dealing with and why it was for me it was such an urgency to leave Arkansas but she was willing, again, to say, Deal, I'll support you.

So off I go to Dalton, Georgia, the carpet capital of the world. So I go and apply for a job Monday morning. Monday afternoon I call my mom and I say, Guess what, I've got a job. I'm going to be a Hyster driver. She's like, What's that? I was, like, I have no idea, but I have orientation tonight. I'm going to be making around \$300 a week. That's a lot of money.

Fast forward a month later, the deal was if I was doing well she would move. Well, I was doing so well that I saved enough money to secure an apartment. So the deal was she would move and she did. I mean, I think there's a lot of parents in this space. How many of you if your child came up to you and said, Hey, Mom, Dad, I think I want to go somewhere else at the age of 17, 18 years old. I think I want to seek other opportunities. I think I want to leave this place and go somewhere else, how many of you would actually say, Okay, I'll support you. Let's figure this out.

I mean, I'm a parent of two. I know if my daughter came up to me and didn't tell me she was going through some things, I would be like what are you talking about? Where are we going? No, we're not going anywhere.

So my mother's willingness from a leadership standpoint at that level -- from a leadership standpoint to sit down and listen to me even though she didn't agree, even though she didn't understand, was still willing to support me. That was everything.

And you think about what she planted inside of me, that ability to sort of make that decision to be independent. Well, it wasn't the last time that she did that. Fast forward a year later after high school, you know, I graduate. I'm going through the motions. I'm not really sure what it is I'm doing with my life. And the military was something that presented itself and I said, Why not?

Now my mother is from Central America, El Salvador. And in the early '80s there was a civil war that was taking place there. My mother understands what war does to people. My mother understands that we, as a country, we're currently

at war in Afghanistan and there are rumors of us possibly going somewhere else. She understood what the risks were if I joined the military.

My mother also has lost a child. One of my sisters passed away from an illness that she was born with, so my mother had this fear that if she -- if I joined the military, the chances of her losing another child, her only son, are pretty great. So she says, No, I don't want you to join the military. I don't support that.

And once again, I said, Mom, just listen to me. And once again, she put herself right in front of me, sat down and listened to everything that I explained and why I believed the military was the best opportunity for me at that time in my life. Now I was 18 years old. I was 19, sorry. I didn't need my mother to go down to the recruiting office and sign for me to join the military. I could have done it but I wanted my mother's blessing. And literally after we spoke for about two hours, my mother said, Okay, if that's what you want to do, I'll support you.

Think about the strength and the courage it took for her to do that. Put all of her

fears aside to say, I'm listening to you and I'm going to support you even though it's going to ache every day that you're gone knowing the possibilities.

Off I go to basic training Fort Benning, Georgia. I'm there for three months. I graduate from basic training. I'm assigned to my unit which was the 101st out of Fort Campbell, Kentucky. I get there in January of 2003. And again, I'm just going through motions. I remember one day my platoon sergeant asked me to do something and whatever it was that I was doing, I was cutting up because J.R. is -- I'm always having a good time laughing.

And he came to tap me on the shoulder. He said, Martinez, you need to be prepared because we're going to deploy sometime soon. And this is my response to this man that at that time had been in the Army at least 15 years. And I looked at him and I said, sergeant, I just got out of basic training. I just got here. I'm not going anywhere yet, relax, and patted him on the back.

How many people have been in the military before? Raise your hands. Raise your

hands.

(Show of hands from the delegation.)

Okay. All right. So there is a gentleman up here. What branch, sir? Air Force. So this does not apply to the Air Force what I was about to do.

(Laughter.)

I'm not going to look down there anymore. My focus -- my eye line is literally going to be from here on down. Even when I look at you, Jim, it's going to be like this from now on.

But like in the military, there is no situation where you can tell your superior to just chill, bro. Like it just doesn't happen like on a first name basis. Like that doesn't happen. Except for the Air Force, it kind of does.

(Laughter.)

But any other branch doesn't really happen. But, again, I wasn't trying to be disrespectful. I was incredibly naive and he understood that. And so of course he said, you know, let me talk to him -- after he's done doing push ups and sit ups and every other exercise that I can think of because he did tell me to chill.

(Laughter.)

And he said to me, Martinez, you need to be prepared because we are going to deploy. He wasn't referencing physically be prepared. He was mentioning mentally I needed to be prepared. You know you've got to learn the hard way sometimes.

A couple weeks later after that conversation that same sergeant comes up and he hands every single one of us in the platoon a sheet of paper and that sheet of paper read that we were going to deploy any day now for 1 day up to 365 days and it listed all of these different countries that we were possibly going to go to. It was happening.

In March of 2003, I found myself on a plane with the rest of my unit going into combat at the age of 19 years of old, this is six months after I joined the military. I didn't have the luxury of having a lot of the extensive training that you normally get before you go into a deployment, before you go into combat. I didn't have the luxury of years on my side where I've experienced things. I didn't have that luxury.

So you know what I had to do. I had to rely on the people that are in my unit. I leaned

on them. If this gentleman does one thing, I'm going to follow what he does. If this person says we should be doing this, that's what I'm going to follow because they know best. They've had that training. They have the experience.

But something interesting happened just within a week and a half of being in country. We had these tents set up and I remember that one of my sergeants would stand at the front of the room and he would give these briefings and he would talk about situations. And he said if we encounter this situation, this is how you respond. If you encounter this, this is how you respond. And of course, I'm not going to sit here and just continuously mention this but, again, I just enlisted. I just graduated from basic training. I have no idea what he's talking about.

Now when you're a private in the Army, you have no voice. You're essentially an intern. You just get paid a little bit more money, right, which still isn't a lot. But you are just supposed to do. And so I'm in the back of the room and I'm listening to this sergeant break down scenarios and situations and how we were supposed to respond and

I'll give you -- I'll leave some of the detailed stuff out of it but I'll give you a basic one.

If something happened to Jim, right, if you are injured and, you know, you're banged up and something has happened to you, what would I probably naturally want to do? Run to you and try to see if I can help you in some way, shape or form. Well, he said, No, that's not what you do. I'm like what do you mean? Well, you got to set up a perimeter because then this whole numbers game plays. Because they're like what happens if you run in there J.R. and now you get injured, now we have lost two. We can't lose two. And that was just a foreign concept to me because I was just so conditioned, as I think most of us are, that if you see somebody in distress, if you see something happening, you run in to help them.

Again, I was 19. Three years before I had just got my license. And I remember when you take the test, they tell you pedestrians have the right-of-way. Now I'm in combat and they are saying, Well, sometimes the enemy will place themselves in front of your Humvee as a way to stop you, so you become a target, putting yourself and

everybody else in the convoy at risk. You don't stop. I was like what? I just got my license three years ago and I was told that you're supposed to stop. Now you are telling me in combat we don't.

That recalibration of the mind is something that I think a lot of people unless you've found yourself in that situation, it's hard to really comprehend. And as you can imagine, a young 19-year-old, I'm in the back of the room like this is -- I don't know. I don't get it. And I started raising my hand asking a lot of questions.

So Sarge, I just want -- you know, just again, just to elaborate a little bit more on that. Sarge, Hey -- and what I started to get from this sergeant was a lot of annoyance that I was asking these questions because I was essentially interrupting his flow in allowing him to complete his task, which I understand at the end of the day we have business to conduct.

But the way that I see it, I'm the extra guy in this unit. You're going to put me everywhere. I'm going to be driving for the platoon sergeant. I'm going to be driving for my squad leader. I'm going to be driving for this, driving

for that. I'm going to be sometimes as a gunner. Sometimes I'm the extra guy in the Humvee. There's so -- the role is so complex that I just wanted to understand.

And even though my sergeant never said just stop asking questions, I don't want to hear what you have to say, Martinez. No more questions. Even though he didn't say that, the one thing he did do is he showed his annoyance. And I started to witness his body language. I mean, listen, we all probably speak a lot of different languages in this space but the one language we can all understand is the body language. Inevitably, you can pick up on someone's body language and understand what they are saying, what they are feeling about a situation.

19-years-old me witnessing this sergeant in the front of the room essentially do that just caused me to get this space where I said, you know what, forget this. I don't want to do this. I can't wait for this deployment to be done. I can't wait for my three years to be done. And I'm going to get out and move along with my life. This isn't for me.

One person, not even saying one word,

one person and his body language was taking that away from me. But yet lucky for me about a week or so after that, we get a briefing from another commander. This time from a Battalion Commander and he is up there speaking on a small podium similar to this. And he is talking about how much of a role every single one of us play. He is looking out into the audience and he's talking about, you matter in the role that you play and you matter and you matter and you matter, you matter. He is saying all of these things and he is pointing out and he's looking and making eye contact. And I'm 19 years old. I'm sitting back there.

Now I'm going to do a little exercise real quick. So I'm looking over here. Raise your hand if you think I'm looking at you.

(Show of hands.)

Okay. So, no, I'm not looking at either one of you. I'm looking at the gentleman he didn't even raise his hand with the nice cool beard. How long does it take you to grow that thing out? Yeah, you. Yeah, you. Yeah, you.

(Laughter.)

How long does it take you to grow that

thing out?

("Six months to a year" from the delegate.)

Six months? Man, get out. That's not fair. You how long it took me to grow this? 20 years, and then it still doesn't come in on this side.

(Laughter.)

I got a lot of burn jokes. I can sit here all day with the burn jokes. I mean, it depends on, you know, but it's early and I don't want to sit here and bore you guys with that.

But my point in that exercise is simple is that, I was looking at that gentleman, yet everybody in that vicinity thought I was looking at them.

So here is this individual giving this speech and he's looking out into the crowd, and I'm thinking he's looking directly at me. He's looking right into my eyes. He's making eye contact. He's talking about me. He's talking to God knows who else was around me. But the point is he introduced this concept of service. He introduced this concept of being a part of a team, being a part of something

bigger.

He introduced all of that. To the point, how effective that was, at the moment that briefing was done, I remember getting in my Humvee with the rest of the unit and going on a mission. And at the end of that mission, we were escorting people from Point A to Point B. And when we got to our destination, I remember thinking to myself, I don't know who those individuals are. I don't know what they do. I just know that they are troops and they have a different specialty. I'm an infantryman. That's my specialty. And we helped them get to this destination.

I was a part of the process, a very small part of the process, but, nonetheless, I was part of the process. I'm thinking that's service, that's my role on the team. All of a sudden now one individual now replaces that passion that I had to be in the military.

Now I start plotting and I start thinking to myself, Well, now I don't want to just limit this to three years. Now I want to do this for six years, nine years, 12 years. I want to do this for 20 years. I want to be like the gentleman

that was on the stage before me. He's doing 24 years. That's what I want to do. When I come back from this deployment, I'm going to go to this school, that school, this school, that school. I want to be this highly decorated soldier by the time my time is done.

We all know the saying, You plan and God laughs. On the 5th of April of 2003, literally a few days shy of me being in country one month, I'm driving a Humvee through a city called Karbala when the front left tire of the Humvee that I was driving ran over a roadside bomb.

It was another routine day. It was another routine mission.

I remember the day vividly. I can give you details about the day. I remember driving in our Humvee and my sergeant that's sitting in the passenger seat making jokes and the guy behind him making jokes. The gunner making a joke. I'm making jokes. Because when you are away from freedom and family and friends, what ultimately fills that void is the humor. You have to find ways to laugh and just pass the time. And so we're cutting up and we were just driving along.

I remember we had to stop at one point. I remember that we had to, you know, essentially find which is the safest route for us to take. And as we were sitting there waiting, I remember how hot it was that day. I remember getting out of the Humvee and I remember standing there and I remember just feeling the heat just beat down on you.

I remember there was a little bit of like -- I don't want to say a disagreement -- but something along those lines with a lieutenant and a couple of the enlisted where they were talking about which route is better. The lieutenant wanted to take this route. Everyone else said that route hasn't been cleared, sir. We should take this route.

That lieutenant said, I'm the lieutenant. I outrank you. You listen to me. Everyone said, That is true. So what route did we take, the Lieutenant's route.

Let's backtrack a little bit a couple weeks before that. There is a guy in my unit. He is taking off his shirt one day and I notice that he has a tattoo on his chest. I asked him -- I said,

What's that tattoo on your chest? He said, That's the unit crest, the logo for our unit. I said, Why did you get that tattooed on your body? He said, Because I love this. This is a brotherhood. I said, It is? He said, Yeah. I said, I don't feel like it's a brotherhood. I honestly don't think anybody cares.

My lieutenant overhears this. My lieutenant takes me outside in the middle of the desert. He puts me -- he tells me to get on top of a picnic table. I'm standing on top of this picnic table and he smokes me. He makes me do push-ups, sit ups, every exercise that he is calling out and the entire time he is lecturing me how this is a brotherhood. How we are a part of something. How we are going to look after one another, be there for one another, not just during this deployment but forever. We're always tied to each other.

At the conclusion whether I wanted to say I agreed or not, I was going to say I agree. I got you, sir. And I remember going back into that tent and finding that guy in my unit and saying, Hey, man, I'm sorry. He said, It's okay. That same lieutenant says, This is the route we're taking.

I'm literally one hand on the steering wheel living my best life looking at my passenger, my sergeant, and just cracking up and just making jokes and then all of a sudden, boom. Immediately the other three guys were thrown out of the vehicle. I was trapped inside of the Humvee. Within a matter of seconds, this Humvee was now engulfed in flames. I can hear ammo that we had inside of the Humvee just heating up and shooting off.

Of course, they couldn't come to my aid immediately. They had to set up a perimeter and make sure it was safe and that took five minutes for two of my sergeants to come and pull me out of that Humvee. But for five minutes I was completely conscious screaming and yelling at the top of my lungs. For five minutes I could see my hands and I could see my hands changing. Honestly, the only time I have ever experienced anything like this is -- at that point in my life, was literally those horror films.

This time of the year when all of us want to get super creative about, you know, that day that's coming up in, you know, three weeks or whatever it is, Halloween, and people get all

creative. And guess what, they want to be as scary as they possibly can be. But then guess what, after the party is over, after you go out and come back home, you take it all off and everything goes back to normal.

I'm looking at my hands and I'm screaming and yelling at the top of my lungs and I'm realizing my hands are never going to go back to normal. I'm gasping for air in the midst of every single scream and yell. In the midst of me saying "help," I'm gasping.

Because, yeah, I sustained burns to the exterior of my body, to my skin, but that wasn't the thing that was threatening whether I was going to survive or not. It was the lacerated liver. It was the broken ribs. It was me inhaling all of the smoke from the fire. That was what was threatening whether I was going to make it or not.

And I can tell you -- I vividly remember there were several instances over the course of those five minutes where my eyes would close because I was just getting weak, and I couldn't fight anymore. And I would close my eyes and I would just -- it was interesting. I could

hear all of the chaos around me. I could hear all of the noise around me but suddenly when I would close my eyes, it just felt like I was at peace and it was just me.

And I would say to myself, you're going to die. You're going to die in this way at this age. There's things you never got an opportunity to pursue.

And then another thought would creep into my mind and I would say to myself, I can't keep my eyes closed. I've got to open my eyes. I've got to fight. Somebody is going to come and pull me out of this Humvee and I would open my eyes and I would continue to scream and yell at the top of my lungs.

You see for me that's a metaphor. Here I am 20 years later. For me that's sort of life. All of us are going to find ourselves in situations where things are just so chaotic, everything around us is chaos. There's a lot of noise and we always try to navigate that noise, navigate the chaos.

And what I have learned in the midst of all of that chaos is I have to close my eyes. I have to connect with my breath. I have to go back

to this word that gets tossed around from time to time, gratitude. Because if I'm able to do that, then I'm able to rejuvenate myself and give myself enough strength, enough power to be able to open my eyes and go back into the chaos to continue to fight for my life.

Now people ask me how did you all of the sudden develop that ability in that moment to just say I'm not going to give up. And I'm like, listen, I don't have enough time to sit here and tell you the details of 19 years prior to that moment, 19 years of life that prepared me for that moment.

I'm telling you everything we experience in life is preparing us. It's preparing us for that big moment in our lives, for that situation that's going to come. It's part of life. We know that. But the problem is, is that when we go through things, we don't look at it and say what's the takeaway? What is something that I can take away from this situation? What's something that I can learn from this situation?

We just get through it and we're like I'm just going to keep moving on. I'm not even

going to stop and reflect on that journey, reflect on how far I've come, reflect on what I've accomplished. We just keep going.

Listen I'm the first one to tell people, Hey, look forward, never look back, right? I'm like no. No, I tell people, yeah, look forward that's where we're going. But occasionally you do want to look in that rearview mirror to see what's behind you. Occasionally, you do want to see how far you've come. Occasionally, you do want to see what you've overcome.

Two of my sergeants pulled me out of the Humvee, started the medivac process. They took me to a local medic station set up in Iraq. When I arrived, they put me into a medically-induced coma. They said, He's using too much energy. So we're just going to put him into a coma right now, preserve that energy. Because if he is going to survive, he is going to need it.

From there, from Iraq, I go to Germany. I get to Germany, I go into emergency surgery. I'm still in the medically-induced coma. When I woke up out of my coma -- well, actually, three days later, once I was stable, they put me on

a plane and brought me to the United States. And I went to the burn center for the military, which is in San Antonio, Texas -- which honestly makes no damn sense to me why you would put a burn center in one of the hottest places in America. Like that just seems like a cruel joke.

(Laughter.)

I mean think about that. Anybody from Texas? Any Texans in the room? Yeah, you guys understand. You know. Summertime it's not pleasant. It's like every time I walked out of the hospital in July and August, it felt like I was reliving the 5th of April all over again. I live in Austin. I still feel that way.

Three weeks after I'm injured and I come out of my medically-induced coma and I hear a voice of a man who's my head doctor. He is the one who went to go get me overseas and flew back with me. And he's saying, Martinez, if you can hear me, open your eyes. And I remember opening my eyes and, literally, the way these lights are just beaming down on me, it's essentially the overhead lights of a hospital, bright. We know what I'm talking about. And I can feel something in my throat because I'm

still intubated.

He said, Hey, we're going to sit you up. And when we sit you up, we're going to pull the tube out. We need you to cough to try to get all of that stuff that's been sitting there for three weeks.

Okay. He sat me up. And when they sat me up, they pulled the tube out and I started coughing and then I look around as much as I could. I didn't have a lot of range of motion. But my eyes can sort of scan the room and I saw a bunch of people, bunch of strangers all wearing green scrubs. They laid me back down and the doctor proceeds to ask me, Do you know where you are, do you know what happened to you?

Of course I had no clue where I was. So he said, You're at Fort Sam Houston. The hospital used to be called Brooke Army Medical Center. He said, You're here. This is the burn center for the military. He said, Do you remember what happened to you? I said, Vaguely. He said, All right. No worries. Why don't you rest and I'm going to come in tomorrow morning and talk to you about the plan that we have for you.

I mean, if somebody approached you right now and said, Hey, let me tell you about the plan that I have for you, how would you respond? But I was too tired to process what this man just said to me.

So the next morning he comes into my room, walks up to my bed. You know, when they're doing their rounds, they mean business. And he says, By now you've noticed you can't do anything for yourself. You can't feed yourself, bathe yourself. You can't walk. You can't even sit up. You can't do anything. But don't worry. We have a team of people that are going to help you.

We're going to have a nurse that's going to come into your room every single morning around 7:00 in the morning and feed you breakfast.

After that, your nurse will put you on a shower bed and take you to the shower and bathe you. After that your nurse will bring you back into your ICU room and start to do wound care and apply all these creams and dressings to your wounds.

After that your occupational therapist -- and he's going on and on about what the routine is going to look like. Meanwhile, I've

completely blocked this man out. Because all I got stuck on is that a nurse is going to come feed me breakfast and a nurse is going to bathe me. And then I thought this might not be so bad after all. I'm just saying.

(Laughter.)

I mean, I don't know. I watch movies and TV shows. You know how those writers they write up all of this crazy stuff and scenarios. And I literally flew here from D.C. and I was in D.C. There was a conference that was happening there. And it was for the Phoenix Society for Burn Survivors. And I've been with this organization for a long time. And it's awesome to be in that space with all these different burn survivors from all walks of life from all different countries.

And I'm talking to this one guy and this one guy says, Yeah, you know, I'm married and, you know, he's like, I met my wife in the hospital. I was like, Oh, wow. Is she a burn survivor as well? He said, No, she was my nurse. And I was like, See, it does happen. It does happen.

(Laughter.)

And so here I am this poor doctor is,

you know, wasting all of that precious oxygen that he's being given on talking to me about the rest of the routine and I'm too busy thinking about what my nurse is going to look like, how tall is she going to be, you know, creating narratives in my head, you know. I'll get out of the hospital. We'll be together. It will be cool. That's literally where my mind went.

And then this dude --

(Laughter.)

This dude that's 6 foot tall walks into my room and he's like, Hey, buddy. I'm going to be your nurse. And I was like, No, you are not.

(Laughter.)

His name is Mike.

Man, that was hard. Listen, man, I'm not one to compare injuries and do all of that stuff. Everyone has their own experience that's unique to them and what's real to them is real to them. But I can tell you and I have been in a lot of hospitals, I have had a lot of friends that have a lot of different types of injuries, especially in the military, but there is something about that burn ward. There is something about it. You can take

the toughest person you know and put them in that situation and it's going to break them.

We take for granted when we have our skin and what it does. When you don't have it -- and I'm going to spare you the details -- when you have to go through the process, it will make the toughest person you know cry.

And so I went through this routine like any other burn survivor. And while I'm in it, I just would plead with Mike and the other nurse for them to stop. And I would ask them why they are torturing me. That's how it felt. And I would say to them, What have I done to you? And they would say, We're sorry, we have to do this. And every time that they would roll me back in my ICU room, I would just be overwhelmed with emotion and just crying because of the pain. And no amount of pain medication can completely take that away.

And I remember after going through this routine for about a week, you know, one day I'm in my ICU room and I'm wondering, why does it hurt so much? And so in that moment, I asked Mike to see my face, to see my body. And he said, Oh, not now, buddy. This guy was pretty much like -- he was kind

of like Mickey Mouse. Like in the sense of where you know how Mickey Mouse -- I have a 2-year-old son. So I'm back in that space where Mickey Mouse Clubhouse is on my TV nonstop and I'm streaming all of these other shows. But my son is now watching Mickey Mouse a lot and it just reminded me of Mike because that's how Mike was. You know, how Mickey's like overly, annoyingly optimistic? You ever have somebody that is so optimistic that you're like you're kind of annoying me, right? That was Mike.

He was like, Hey, buddy. Like that's how he talked to me every day. This is going to be a great day. He's, like, Not now, buddy. That's the way he talked. I later learned he loves Disney so it made sense.

(Laughter.)

But in that time I was like, man, he is kind of like -- he is so optimistic and he's kind of annoying because I'm just going through -- I'm going through it right now.

And he's said, Not now, buddy. We've got plenty of time, you've got a lot of surgeries. Don't worry about it. And I hit him with the -- if I'm going to have to live like this for the rest of

my life, I might as well start learning now what it is that I have to live with. And that was something he couldn't argue with. So he picked me up with the help of another nurse. They sat me in a chair similar to a chair that you guys are sitting in right now. My arms are all hanging off to the side, my head is down. He pulls that tray that we all eat on but then you fold the top back and there's a mirror tucked in there. And he pulls that up and he says to me, When you're ready, the mirror is right in front of you.

And I don't know what I was expecting to see but I just took a deep breath and I slowly started to pick my head up and my eyes met the mirror and I turned my head as much as I could to each side and I'd seen enough. I picked up my right arm and I pushed the mirror away. And I hit him with the question, Why? Why do I look like this? Why did this happen to me? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why?

For about three weeks, the next three weeks, I was just this angry unpleasant kid to be around. I found myself just telling everybody, including my mother, I would have been better off

had they just left me in the Humvee to die. Because I started feeding narratives. Where your focus goes, your energy follows. And what I started feeding was I started feeding that I'm never going to be able to be in the presence of, quote-unquote, normal people. I'm never going to find someone that I can, you know, date, let alone marry, let alone have children with. I'm never going to be able to have a job. Oh, because they also told me that I couldn't stay in the Army. They told me that I was going to be medically discharged. So, literally, within the first couple of days of seeing my body, both of my identities were taken away from me.

The identity that I knew for 19 years of my life when I looked at myself in the mirror, the identity that I was starting to create for myself because I wanted to be like the gentleman that was on the stage earlier doing 24 years. That was taken away from me.

I think about literally laying in my hospital room and looking out these big windows that looked out onto downtown San Antonio and I would just cry. I was just -- my life is over.

And then one day my mom and I just had

a heart-to-heart conversation and she pretty much was like I don't know why this happened. I'm just asking you to try to do three simple things. One, believe something good will come from this, have a little bit of faith and just try to be that kid that's always so positive.

And in that moment I was willing to listen to my mom, not just hear her. There is a difference between listening and hearing. If you're married, you know there's a difference between the two.

(Laughter.)

That stays here. Okay? I don't want my wife to pick up on that.

And in that moment I was like what else do I have, I might as well try it. And so every morning I would wake up. And let me tell you how powerful that is, the mind, how powerful that is.

So literally a couple days after making this decision of I'm going to try, I'm going to try. So I only have one ear, right? The little nub I have here was because they tried to do a little plastic surgery. And I finally was just

forget it. Just let it go. That's fine. I can hear. I can hear out of it but I make people believe I can't because where would the fun be if people knew that I could hear. I like to have a little fun, you know.

(Laughter.)

If I'm going to be given this incredible piece of artwork, I might as well have some fun with it as well.

And so I remember one morning you have to lay on your back. You have to sleep on your back. You can't sleep on your sides for the obvious reasons. And I remember one morning going to sit up and I felt some resistance. And, you know, finally just kind of pushed/pulled through the resistance and sat up. And when I sat up, I turned around and looked at the pillow because I was like what was preventing me from sitting up so easily. And I saw literally pieces of my ear like cartilage on the pillow because I had laid in that position all night and it stuck to the pillow.

Now some people in a different stage of your journey maybe that triggers you and I can understand that. But at that point I was, like,

that's my ear on the pillow.

(Laughter.)

And I just smiled and I was like, all right, just get up and move on with the day. The mind, man. The mind, such a powerful thing.

I would have surgeries and, you know, wake up after anesthesia rubbed off and I would stand up and I would go stand in the mirror and I wanted to analyze everything the doctors did. And it was kind of cool to me at this point.

As you mentioned in the introduction, six months after I was injured, I started visiting patients. Literally, the nurse asked me to visit patients. I said, No. She said, Why not? I said, Because I'm 20 years old. I'm not a counselor. I'm not a therapist. What am I going to say? She just kept insisting that I go into that room. And finally I went into that room.

And when I went into that room, I felt the weight. I felt it was such a heavy room to walk into. It was completely dark in the middle of the day. The room was completely pitch black dark. I just felt the energy. And I wanted to run away so bad. I wanted to avoid that because I had never

been taught how to essentially deal with that type of energy.

And so instead of me running away, I just thought to myself what would I have wanted, what did I want when I was in his situation when I was in that hospital? I wanted someone to come and walk into the room and I wanted someone to just keep me company and just talk.

So I walked into his -- up to his bed. I introduced myself. I asked him some simple questions. Like where he was from, his unit, what happened. And we started having a conversation. And I could tell you that it was that time that I realized my definition of a conversation was very different. So I used to believe a conversation consisted of if you and I are going to have a conversation, I have to speak 50 percent of the time and you equally speak 50 percent of the time. Well, that day when I went into that patient's room, we talked for 45 minutes. When I say we talked, it was really him. I just listened.

And I remember when I started to walk out of the room, I opened the door. But before I could walk out of the room, something stopped me and

something caught my attention. And I turned around and looked back into the room. And what I noticed that the light above his bed was on and he was actually out of his bed. And he was opening the curtain to the big windows in his room. He was allowing some natural light to come in. And something so simple said so much to me. I gave him hope. I shed some light on this dark road that he was on.

And instead of ignoring that and just thinking it was one-off experience, I decided, no, in that moment what I was going to start doing was visiting patients every single day and that's what I did. I started visiting patients.

And for me the intention was to put myself in a space with them and to allow them to be able to relate, to see somebody else that they can relate to, and connect with and just, honestly, just cut up with them. But after a few months of doing this, I remember one night walking back to my room around 8:00 at night and just thinking about these visits and thinking about the conversations I was having and what I realized is that it was doing just as much for me as it was for them. Because what I

was introduced to, again, was this concept of service. I was reintroduced to this idea of service.

I realized that I could continue to serve. I didn't have to be in a uniform. I could serve in this capacity using my story, using my experiences. That's what I could do.

A year after I was injured, I got involved with a nonprofit raising awareness for service members and their families and educating people on the challenges that they endure when they transition out of the military back into what we refer to as civilian life. I became a spokesman for that nonprofit. I started traveling all over.

I spent almost three years in a hospital recovering. When I got out, I was 22 years old. Let me tell you something that I held onto for such a long time. During those three years, every time that I would go into these hospitals -- these patients rooms and have conversations, most of the time I would walk in there and guess what, I'd see people sitting at the foot of their bed in uniform. And the patient would say, Oh, J.R., I want to introduce you to this is my buddy from my unit.

This is my leadership from my unit. And I would say, Oh, nice to meet you. And they would just come for a couple of days, just cut up.

Nobody from my unit ever came to my room, not even that lieutenant that said, We are a brotherhood. The guy that smoked me in the middle of the desert and said we will always be tied together to each other. Never called. Never wrote a letter. That hurts. Because, once again, my entire life all I have been looking for is a sense, a place where I feel like I can fit in and belong and I thought that that was going to be it. I thought it was going to be with those group of individuals and it wasn't. They let me down.

Listen, I connected with them years later, not that lieutenant. I still never connected with him. But I connected with some other guys in my unit. And they all apologized and they said, Honestly, we just removed ourselves. We never reached out because we didn't know what to say. I said, Man, I wish you would have told me that a long time ago because I didn't know what to say. I didn't know what to do. But if we're willing to actually be in the same space together and not avoid

that energy, we can figure it out together. We can learn how to be vulnerable with one another. It could have saved a lot of heartache.

Listen, I have been able to do some really cool things with my life and that video that we played at the beginning was my way of just showing you guys that, you know, just reminding you that you got J.R. Martinez up here to speak, not Seal. That was my way of just allowing you guys to know that Seal is not --

(Laughter.)

It happens a lot. People come up to me all of the time and are like, Seal. And I'm, like, no, no.

(Laughter.)

It happens so much that I'm at a point in my life where people come up and say, You're Seal. And I'm like, Yeah, yeah, yeah.

It backfired on me one time, though. I was hanging out with some friends and we were at this bar and we were just hanging out. And this guy comes up to me and he has a camera -- which who has a camera, like an actual camera? And he comes up to me and he says, Oh, my God. He says, I grew up --

and I forget where it was, somewhere in like the Midwest -- and he talked about how difficult it was growing up there and how, you know, he felt out of place. And he said but the one thing that would always, you know, give me energy and positivity and hope was your music.

And I was like, Oh, this is -- because he came up to me and he was like, Are you Seal? And I was like -- well, no, he came up to my friend, who was a girl. We worked on a show together. And he gave the camera to her and he said, Can you take a picture of me and your boyfriend? And she's like two things are wrong with this. One, he's not my boyfriend, and, two, he's not Seal.

And I looked at her and I said, Just take the picture, just take the picture. Like it's too difficult to explain it. They don't believe you, blah, blah, blah. This guy came up to me one time and he's like, You're Seal. I'm like, no, no, I'm not. He's like, come on, man. I'm not going to tell anybody. And I was like, Man, I'm not Seal. He's like, No, I'm not going to tell anybody. I'm like, Fine, I'm Seal. He was like, I knew it, and he walked away.

(Laughter.)

And I was like, okay, that's how this works. So the guy puts his arm around me. We take the picture and then he says, you know, what got me through my childhood was your music. And I'm like, oh, no. I thought you were going to leave and you would figure it out tomorrow when you looked at your photos. And then he turns and he looks at me and he puts his hand on my shoulder and he looks at me dead in the eye and he starts to get emotional. And I'm, like, God, this is not what I -- and, you know, it was just one of those moments where I was like I regret actually agreeing to the fact -- telling somebody that I was Seal but it happens all of the time.

But the point is, is like, I've done some really cool things. And the thing that I realize, as I said earlier, that I have been seeking my entire life was a sense of belonging and being a part of something and feeling seen and feeling heard.

When I got out of the military, people they sent me out into the world and they said you're a disabled veteran. That's what you tell people

that you are. I didn't know. People started saying you are a burn victim. A burn victim. Okay. That's what I am. That's how I introduced myself. Hi, I'm J.R. Martinez, a disabled veteran, a burn victim.

I remember being introduced to this organization I mentioned earlier and they said, okay, let's correct. The first thing we're going to do is you actually gotta replace that word "victim" with "survivor." You're not a burn victim. You're a burn survivor. But still disabled veteran. When you hear that, you think limitations.

When I was 22 and I got out into the world, listen, I struggled. I wanted the opportunity to be a speaker. I wanted the opportunity to share. People just boxed me in and said you're a veteran. Just stay in that space. You will be fine in that space. That's what people kept telling me.

I had healed physically, yes, but mentally and emotionally I had not. So, unfortunately, the constant rejection, the constantly seeking something bigger, I unfortunately started drinking. And I just paired that and that

is not the healthiest thing to do.

For two years of my life, I put myself in really unsafe positions. I was just angry at people and at life. No one cared. No one wanted to listen.

And it took my best friend, who was actually in the Air Force, for him one night in the midst of me trying to fight him, not because he did anything, because I was just so enraged and angry at life and I wanted to fight somebody. This dude is 6 foot, 4, 280 pounds. That tells you like I wasn't in my right state of mind.

And instead of him actually saying, Okay, let me lay a couple on you real quick J.R. and put you at ease. No. Instead what he said was, Sit down in the passenger seat of my car. And I sat in the passenger seat of his car. And he said, Man, you need to cry. And I was like, I don't need to cry. And he said, You need to cry. And I started crying and everything started coming out, man. Everything.

My life turned. My life changed after that night after that conversation because he didn't teach me -- he didn't teach me how to be vulnerable

by saying here is a book or here is a podcast. He did it. He created a space for me to feel safe and seen and heard.

My life changed after that. I got the opportunity to become an actor. I got the opportunity to go on this show Dancing. I got the opportunity to write a book. I got the opportunity now to start speaking to audiences all over the world.

My point is, guys, the biggest thing I wanted to leave with you, guys, is I've heard in having a call with you guys a couple weeks ago with just learning about the pride in being in this organization. Because I think all of us can do a better job of showing up for one another. I think all of us can do a better job of actually sitting down and actually listening to somebody else.

If there is one thing that you take away from the time that we have spent together, I hope you think of that 4 foot, 11, mother that despite her not agreeing with certain things that I wanted to do with my life, her willingness to still sit down and listen.

No matter what role you play in an

organization, you have the opportunity to be a leader. You have the opportunity to impact people. I was 20, 21 years old rolling through the hospital and people would come up to me and say, I don't know who you are, I don't know what happened to you, but I want to just tell you that this is what you did for me just by me watching you over there doing what you're doing. They didn't even know what the conversation was about. They just saw my body language.

Every single one of you in this space can actually impact somebody else, but you have to be willing to do that. Because on a human level, you have to remember and understand that all you ever wanted was for someone to do that for you. It's not about over thinking it. It's simply about just thinking about approaching it from a human being standpoint. How am I going to show up for that individual over there even though he is wearing a Packers jersey.

(Laughter.)

I mean, that is, that's tough. But I mean I can't talk. I mean, Cowboys. Any Cowboy fans?

("Yes" from the delegation.)

Yeah. This is your year as they say for the last how many? But I can say that because my team is horrible, too. I'm a Saints fan, so. But we got a win yesterday, so we'll build on that, whatever. Whatever. That's what those fans that go through that pain always say, right? We're building. We're building.

(Laughter.)

But listen, guys, I have created now a network of people of friends that I'm not afraid to actually sit down and listen to somebody and have a conversation. And if somebody calls me or if someone reaches out and says, I need some help, I need some guidance, I need whatever it is, I'm here for them. That's the way we should all show up for one another.

So thank you guys so much for the opportunity to be here with you today. I would also like to extend to all of the service members in this space, to the family members of those, I know that we're getting ready to approach, you know, in a month or so approach Veteran's Day and you guys hopefully will be inundated with a lot of "thank you

for your services." But if you haven't served in the military and even if you have and if you come across somebody that has served, I challenge you not to just say, "Thank you for your service." I challenge you to actually ask them about their service. Because we can say thank you but do we know what we are thanking them for. Instead ask them about their service, get to know them on a deeper level because you'll be surprised that that is not just a soldier, a sailor, an airman, you know, marine. Those are people.

So to those vets, thank you guys so much for your service. To every single one of you, have a great rest of your time here in Vegas and just show up for each other. That's it.

Thank you guys. It was a pleasure.

(Standing ovation.)