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Phil Taylor (left); portrait of Ben Dossett (right)  
photo by Chris Fritchie



soldier and delivering the painting to the family free of charge. Each work is paid for through donations to the foundation and sponsors who want to recognize the sacrifice of our fallen warriors and the families who continue to love them deeply.

Although his primary source of income is as general manager for QuikWash America, Phil Taylor is an artist by trade and founder of the Texas Fallen Soldier Project. He believes intensely in the purpose for creating his portraits of fallen heroes. "It is my goal...to provide comfort and a place of reference for the family members in their time of need. I want them to feel as if their sacrifice has been recognized and their fallen hero has not and will not be forgotten," says Mr. Taylor.

## Portrait of a Soldier

By Debbie Vallejo

**THE BURDEN** of sacrifice is not only borne by our men and women who serve in our armed forces, but also by their families and friends who support them despite the danger and potential for tremendous grief and heartache. To say goodbye to a loved one going to serve in Iraq or Afghanistan means saying goodbye for several months, years, or as some families have found, forever.

It is a terrible thing to lose a child, to experience the grief; the sheer physical pain of it comes crushing down on you with no warning. There is no way to change the past, to bring back a loved

one, or to relieve the hurt that only time will heal, but the strong foundations of friendship and the strength of others can help ease the heavy burden of grief. One Frisco artist has found a way to bring some measure of comfort to parents grieving for children lost in war.

Local artist and Frisco resident Phil Taylor established the Texas Fallen Soldiers Project a year ago. The project pursues its mission of honoring and respecting those "Texas soldiers who have sacrificed their lives while protecting our freedom" by creating unique, hand-painted portraits of the fallen

### CREATING A LEGACY

The project itself was birthed in tragedy, an example of how terrible circumstances pave the way for something incredibly powerful. The Taylor's daughter, Jordin, was a close friend and classmate of a young man by the name of Benjamin Dossett. Ben ran track and played soccer at Frisco High School and had dreams of graduating high school with his friends and beginning the next phase of his life, perhaps even joining the Navy.

On Wednesday, May 23<sup>rd</sup> of last year, Ben was killed in a motorcycle accident at Preston Road and Wade Boulevard just a few days before he was scheduled to graduate from Frisco High School. The end of Ben's life was devastating to

everyone who knew him. Mr. Taylor stayed up for 24 hours working on a portrait of Ben in order to have it ready to give to his parents the day of the funeral. “We fell in love with the painting and with the Taylors,” said Dwayne Dossett, Ben’s father. “Phil put so much effort into a gift for us... we cherish that gift.” As a result the Taylor and Dossett families have become close friends, drawn together by grief and a need to keep memories of a young man alive. “The painting is a constant reminder that Ben is still with us,” explains Mr. Dossett, “that his heart, soul and laughter are still here in our hearts. I walk past the painting in the morning with the biggest smile on my face.”

After witnessing the impact the painting had on Ben’s parents, the Taylors began wondering if there was a way to bring comfort to others grieving for a loved one. “Basically after such a moving and rewarding experience of giving the portrait to the Dossetts and seeing the painting help bring a strong sense of Ben’s presence to the home, I knew I wanted to continue painting portraits for families that have lost a child,” explains Mr. Taylor. “From there it was a natural progression to



Emerson Brand (top); Sgt. Chandler Walker (below)

provided by Phil Taylor

move to the fallen soldiers of Texas.”

### THE GIFT OF AN IMAGE

Emerson Brand was killed in Baghdad along with three of his fellow soldiers in March 2007. Mr. Taylor drove to the Brand’s home in Oklahoma last Christmas to present the Brands with a painting of their son. Emerson’s mother, Debi Brand, remembers the day she received the portrait and the emotion that came with the capturing of her son’s image

on canvas. “I have one son and one child and that son was an American Infantryman,” says Mrs. Brand. “It is very meaningful that someone cared enough to take that to their heart and create this picture for us.” Part of the comfort comes from knowing others cared enough to take notice of their child’s willingness to serve and die for his country. “Emerson is with us always,” says Mrs. Brand. “We are keeping him alive with things that remind us of him. The portrait of him has a special place and is just one of many things we use to remember him.”

Putting the image together takes time and effort. Understanding the soldier before beginning is a key part of the process. “Before I start a portrait of a soldier I read about and come to know the individual and who they were,” explains Mr. Taylor. Families send

letters, pictures, emails, journals or anything else that may help him get a feel for the soldier’s personality, hobbies and character. “I have seen some of the letters that the soldiers sent home before they were killed,” says Mr. Taylor. “Many of them describe extremely difficult circumstances...then, of course, they all share how much they love and miss their family and home.”

After pulling together all of the information and photographs, Mr. Taylor



Lance Cpl. Nick Perez  
provided by Phil Taylor

Mr. Taylor paints approximately 30 hours a week. Managing to balance the requests for paintings with his full time job and spending time with his family can be a daunting task. "Some days and nights I am a little tired and weary...when those moments come I look into the faces of the soldiers I have painted and think of their sacrifice and it helps me carry on," says Mr. Taylor. A Phil Taylor painting is typically appraised at \$5,000, but he receives no monetary reward for the work he does on the project.

#### SPONSORS

It is hard to imagine the depth of feeling something like a hand-painted portrait has on family members of a fallen soldier.

The paintings provided by the project demonstrate to parents that others take note of the sacrifice made by their child. "To think that someone would invest that kind of time and effort and energy into honoring someone they didn't know is truly a gift from God," says Dwayne Dossett, Ben's dad. "I think that's the way Phil looks at it...hopefully there will be people out there who will sponsor the project."

The funds collected through the organization go directly to supplies, shipping and administration costs of the project. Donations can be sent directly to the address provided on the website at [www.texasfallensoldiers.com](http://www.texasfallensoldiers.com). Individuals who sponsor a painting have their names attached directly to an individual portrait. There is also a way to request a portrait online at the same website.

Franklin D. Roosevelt once said, "Those who have long enjoyed such privileges as we enjoy, forget in time that men have died to win them." An organization like the Texas Fallen Soldiers Project provides an image so others never forget the sacrifice and legacy of a soldier.

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*Debbie Vallejo is a freelance writer living in Frisco.*

decides how he wants the portrait to look and then begins creating the painting. "Once I get the picture I am looking for, I sketch the image or images of the soldier on canvas." Mr. Taylor merges pictures from different areas of a particular soldier's life and blends them with the portrait to create a unique visual image made especially for the family of the fallen soldier. In several of the paintings the image of an American flag is created in the background and blended with the portrait of the person.

Class of 2000 Frisco High School graduate Chandler Walker enlisted in the Marines after high school and served two tours in Iraq. During his last tour of duty his platoon was completing an inspection of a bridge over the Euphrates River when they were attacked. Many of Sgt. Walker's fellow marines and his best friend, Lance Cpl. Nick Perez, were killed that day in combat. Sgt. Walker, who is currently living in Frisco with his wife, was wounded and received two Purple Hearts for his service. Mr. Taylor painted a portrait of Sgt. Walker and is currently working on one of Lance Cpl. Perez. Tammy Hennegan is Sgt. Walker's mother. "It's so hard to be a mom and be

waiting and wondering if you are going to get that phone call," said Mrs. Hennegan. "I thank God that my son is still alive, but you feel so bad for the mothers who got a different kind of news." The painting of Nick Perez was presented to the Perez family in Austin at the end of February.

#### A LIFETIME OF COMMITMENT

Mr. Taylor has painted 11 soldiers to date, and is constantly working on new paintings and adding names as more people contact him requesting a portrait. When asked how long he will continue creating portraits, Mr. Taylor's response is, quite simply, forever. "Currently, if all goes well, I am able to produce three portraits a month," he says. "So at this pace to do all the Texas fallen and any other requests that come from other states, the project appears to be a life-long mission." Texas is second only to California in the number of fatalities since the war in Iraq began, with 364 Texans lost since the beginning of combat operations. The original timetable for the project was ten years, but Mr. Taylor is committed to filling all requests for portraits whether they come from Texas residents or from other states.