On Oct. 30 August Cabrera’s two little boys had a sleepover with friends and the next day they all went trick-or-treating. Roanin, 5, and Max, 7, ran from house to house in their Maryland suburb blissfully unaware that their mother had gotten up early that morning to drive to Dover Air Force Base in Delaware to witness the transfer of their father’s remains.

She didn’t want to ruin their Halloween. Army Lt. Col. David E. Cabrera was killed in action in Afghanistan on Oct. 29, 2011. The Ph.D. graduate of the National Catholic School of Social Service (NCSSS) had earned many distinctions in his life. The last one was heartbreak: He had become the only Army social worker to be killed in combat.

“He didn’t have to be there on that convoy,” says August Cabrera. “He could have stayed at the hospital and let the soldiers come to him. But he knew he was needed in the field.”

Cabrera was one of 17 people killed on a busy road in Kabul when a Taliban suicide bomber driving a vehicle packed with some 1,500 pounds of explosives rammed into an armored military bus. Three other U.S. soldiers and eight U.S. civilian contractors were also among the casualties. It was the deadliest attack on the U.S.-led coalition in the Afghan capital since the war began.

It wasn’t long before the attack on the NATO convoy made the news in the United States that Saturday August read about it while online. Her father was visiting from Washington state and she told him she had a feeling that David was one of the soldiers who had been killed. He tried to reassure her. She told him that early that morning she had woken up at 2 a.m. and couldn’t get back to sleep. She was uneasy and had a feeling that something was wrong.

The next day, Sunday, Oct. 30, she tried to keep a normal routine. After church, while her father played baseball in the backyard with his grandsons, August went out to the front yard and had just picked up a rake when the notification team, along with one of her best friends, walked up the driveway.

She had been trying to prepare herself for the possibility of that visit, but when it happened she says it felt like “my heart had been ripped out. He was my world.”

An Unfinished List

“He biked across Europe. He took his older kids across country and was a wonderful combination of clinical work, science, and social work. He was a Ph.D. candidate at NCSSS. He was gregarious and had an unassuming way of bringing people together. He had an adventurous spirit and was fearless when he wanted to do something.

“He climbed Mount Kilimanjaro. He was the person who did all of those things that most of us just talk about doing. He lived three lifetimes in his 41 years,” says Cox, who had recently written a book chapter with Cabrera on military families.

In the days following her husband’s death August came across his bucket list. “He wrote down all the things he wanted to accomplish in his life. So many of them were already crossed off. It’s as if he knew he didn’t have much time,” she says “It was the things left to do that crushed me. Celebrating his golden wedding anniversary. Meeting his grandchildren.”

One of the items at the top of that list was getting his Ph.D. “It was so important to him. He was an active duty officer with significant responsibilities, he was a dedicated father to two children [Gillian, 12, and Corbin, 14, live in Texas with Cabrera’s ex-wife Angela, with whom August maintains a strong relationship], and we had just gotten married and were starting our own family, but he found a way to do it,” says August. “He loved his time at Catholic University.”

Cabrera was born in Florida and grew up in Houston, graduating with a degree in psychology from Texas A&M University in 1993. He earned his master’s in social work in 1994 from the University of Texas at Arlington. He joined the Army Medical Service Corps in 1996.

“It was his spirit of adventure that initially led him to the military,” says August. “He liked the idea of moving around the world. He needed change. And in the end he found the place he needed to be. He fell in love with helping soldiers. He had a servant’s heart.”

During more than 15 years on active duty, Cabrera had assignments in Germany, Bosnia, and Fort Lewis in Washington state, where he was the officer in charge of managing the behavioral health and combat operational stress programs for more than 4,500 soldiers.

In 2002, just after he married August, he was assigned to Walter Reed Army Medical Center (WRAMC) in Washington, D.C. (which recently closed and combined with the former National Naval Medical Center to become the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Md.), where he was one of a select few Army social work officers chosen for the Walter Reed Social Work Fellowship in Child and Family Practice, a two-year advanced training program through a mutually fostered relationship between WRAMC and NCSSS, he applied and was accepted to pursue his doctorate in social work at Catholic University at the same time.

A Unique Military Relationship

“This is a rigorous program,” says James Zabora, dean of NCSSS. “These Army officers spend all day in clinical work through the fellowship while simultaneously working on their doctorate. Within a three-year period the fellows — licensed clinical social workers — provide social work services to active duty soldiers and their families, participate in the fellowship, complete Ph.D. coursework, and complete a dissertation. We do allow elective credit for work done through the fellowship, but, still, this is a demanding endeavor.”

“The Ph.D. program augments the clinical training in the fellowship,” says Dean Rueckert, program director of the Social Work Fellowship in Child and Family Practice at Walter Reed. Rueckert, who is retired from active duty, received his Ph.D. from NCSSS in 1993. “It is a wonderful combination of clinical work, science, and
**Women are put in very difficult situations. Sometimes the insurgent benefit of the CUA program is NCSSS, 22 of them through the received doctoral degrees from there.

**Maj. Chescheir, and Betty Timberlake served on a joint task force to develop the coursework to encourage WRAMC social work to develop the coursework to encourage WRAMC social work off officers to take the WRAMC fellowship in social work.**

**Since 1958, 27 Army and Air Force social work officers have received doctoral degrees from NCSSS, 22 of them through the WRAMC/NCSSS collaboration.**

Cox says that one of the “great benefits of the CUA program is that it allowed us to discuss the issues of faith. Military chaplains are there to help meet the religious needs of our troops. But there is certainly an element of faith to what we do. These young men and women are put in very difficult situations. Sometimes the insurgent can be a 14-year-old boy. They struggle to come to grips with evil in the world. The NCSSS program prepared me to discuss faith issues and to help our soldiers within their own faith traditions.”

“My time at CUA was a gift,” says Lt. Col. Jennifer Humphries, who went through the fellowship and doctoral program at the same time as Cabrera, receiving her Ph.D. in 2006. “It allowed me to concentrate on the study of social work literature, research, and clinical advances in subject areas that have an impact on the Army every day.”

Humphries is chief of the Behavioral Health Division at the European Regional Medical Command in Heidelberg, Germany, and social work consultant to Brig. Gen. Nada West. Humphries was hit hard by the news of Cabrera’s death. She remembers her friend as someone “who enjoyed squeezing every drop out of life. He couldn’t believe [he had died] and had to read the email several times. Because he is a social worker, he didn’t even want to be a weapon in offense at anyone. That is what makes it so difficult to comprehend.”

The staff and faculty at NCSSS were hit hard as well. Barbara Early, associate professor and chair of the Ph.D. program, taped a photo to her office door of Cabrera with her and other faculty members taken the day he defended his dissertation. “I wanted to remember his smile,” she says. “He was a talented social work professor and dedicated Army officer, but we will also remember his easy humor and his down-to-earth playfulness throughout the rigors of class work and dissertation.”

“He was always stopping by my office trying to get me to take a ride on his motorcycle. ‘Sir,’ he would say, ‘just once around the campus.’ I told him he didn’t need to call me ‘sir.’ But he loved to play it up,” remembers Zabora with a laugh.

“He was passionate about his children, such a dedicated father,” says Karlynn BrintzenhofeSzoc, associate professor at NCSSS. “I remember him telling me he had to miss so class so he could fly to Texas to be at a school event with his older children. ‘In some ways I wasn’t surprised to hear he was on that convoy,’ says BrintzenhofeSzoc.

**Supporting the Troops and Their Families**

Cabrera knew the drain on the troops was increasing and he wanted to support them in the field. After receiving his Ph.D. in 2006 he deployed to Iraq for six months. He came back and was stationed at Fort Lewis. In February 2010, he returned to the Washington, D.C., area where he was assigned to the U.S. Army Health Services Unit in Bethesda as director of social work and as assistant professor of family medicine at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences.

And then he volunteered for another deployment.

“These are unique times,” says Ruesch. “We’ve had a prolonged war on terror using an all-volunteer force with repeat deployments. We have never fought a war like this. Our troops deploy, they come back home and re-integrate, and then they go back to war. There are many adjustments for the soldiers and their families. They have been exposed to traumatic situations. They may have injuries. Some can cope. Others may have post-traumatic stress disorder and need more help.

“We are also trying to save the families of our troops like never before in military history. The role of the social worker is highly important. We have taken on a greater and greater role in the provision of care.”

“These deployments have been in areas that grapple with poverty, oppression, and frail social services. Just arriving to these countries has been eye-opening for the young soldiers,” says Humphries. “Our services have provided health, wellness, and strength to the force.”

“The loss of the United States Army is so significant,” says Ruesch. “David Cabrera was a highly trained, skilled, and educated soldier, officer, and clinician, with a dedication that came from his heart. ‘You can’t replace that.’”

In the few short months since her husband’s death, August has received emails and letters from around the world. “I know he was amazing. But I’m biased. It has been so humbling to hear from soldiers and family members telling me how he touched and changed their lives.”

She will treasure one letter more than any other: “Our anniversary was Oct. 19. David wrote me a letter and mailed it on Oct. 1. So that I would get it for our anniversary, but it came four days after he died. It was a beautiful love letter. He left no doubt how much he loved me.”

August carried the letter with her for weeks until she was afraid it would wear out. So she put it away. She is trying to move forward in her life, recently making plans to move back to her home state of Washington, where she and Cabrera had intended to live after he retired from the military. She will begin work on her Ph.D. in indigenous development. And August is putting together a team to climb Machu Picchu for her 40th birthday in 2013. “David will be with us in spirit,” she says.

As she forges ahead, August says she is guided by something Max said to her shortly after Cabrera’s death. “He asked me what he wanted people to remember about his father,” she recalls. Her 7-year-old responded, “Daddy never said ‘no’; He never said ‘Let’s do it later.’”

Matias Ferreira and Matthew White are freshmen in CUA’s School of Nursing. The two have a lot in common. They are both 23-year-old athletes who enjoy running marathons. And they were both severely injured serving in Afghanistan.

Ferreira lost both legs below the knees in January 2011. The U.S. Marine corporal was a machine gunner on patrol in southern Afghanistan when he went up to a rooftop with a group to set up machine guns and sniper rifles. He jumped off the roof to a platform six feet below and landed on an improvised explosive device. “I didn’t feel any pain initially, but I knew I was in deep,” he recalls.

A helicopter came to the scene quickly to medevac him to Bagram Air Base Hospital in Afghanistan for life-saving treatment and then he was flown to Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany, where he was stabilized. Just 24 hours after arriving in Germany he was on his way to Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C.

That’s where he met White, an Army sergeant who lost his right leg below the knee on his second deployment to Afghanistan in May 2010. “I looked up to him right away. He was doing normal things. He was running marathons on a prosthetic leg and scuba diving. It motivated me. I knew that if he could get where he was, so could I,” said Ferreira, who has run several races, including marathons, since completing his rehabilitation.

The two became friends. White, nearing the end of his rehabilitation, was looking to the future. He hadn’t anticipated a medical retirement from the Army but as he thought about his back-up plan, a career in health care seemed like the right fit. “It’s another way of serving,” he said.

Enter Bob Talbot, CUA’s former director of athletics. Now retired, Talbot has been an avid volunteer at Walter Reed. “He was a friend and a mentor,” said White. “He told me about CUA’s School of Nursing and how it would be a good option for me. The smaller size of the school and the classes seemed to be what I would need if I was going to give college a try after five years out of the school setting. So I applied and Bob wrote me a letter of recommendation.”

Talbot and White encouraged Ferreira, who had always thought he might like to be an emergency medical technician after the military, to apply as well. White entered the program in fall 2011 and Ferreira came after him in the first semester of 2012, after completing eight months of rehabilitation.

“You take a lot of medical courses in the military I can start an I.V. in a second,” says Ferreira. “So in some ways I feel like I am coming in at an advantage. But in so many other ways, it has been really hard to reprogram my brain to be back in school. For the past five years my focus has been on military training — what I need to do to stay safe and to keep everyone around me safe.”

As he makes the transition from military life to college life, Ferreira says that one of the hardest adjustments is being separated from his “brothers.” “My unit just deployed again. It’s really hard knowing that I’m not with them.”

Their classmates have been supportive as well. “We stick out for a lot of reasons, including our age. The other students have shown a lot of interest. They ask questions about our military experience and they seem to appreciate what we’ve done,” adds Ferreira.

In their psychology class, Ferreira and White have shared their experiences with their classmates, even offering to help a few with their papers on such topics as the Taliban and prosthetics.

Their college education is paid by the military’s vocational rehabilitation program and by the Post-9/11 GI Bill. CUA has nearly 150 veterans on campus getting tuition help from the GI Bill and from the Yellow Ribbon Program, which CUA chooses to participate in to help fund tuition and fee expenses. Recently, the 2012 Guide to Military-Friendly Colleges and Universities named Catholic University to its list of schools that have instituted initiatives to help veterans begin or return to school.

“Veterans and military personnel have much to gain from education at CUA,” says retired Navy Cmdr. Ed Schaefer, CUA’s veterans affairs coordinator. “But most important, our University is enriched by their presence on campus and in the classrooms.”

Terry Walsh, director of Undergraduate Programs in Nursing, agrees. “Matthew and Matias are role models to all of us — faculty and students. They truly are inspirational.”

— E.N.W.