

INTERVIEW WITH MANUEL MENDOZA VALENCIA VALENCIA

CONNIE DOEBELE, C-SPAN HOST: How long did you stay at Walter Reed?

MANUEL MENDOZA VALENCIA, IRAQ WAR VETERAN: I think just a little bit over a year. It really wasn't that long.

It was, I think at the most, 14 or 16 months total since the day I got there.

DOEBELE: So, you got there in October 2004. We talked to you in March of 2005.

MENDOZA VALENCIA: And I left in August of 2005. So, I was there for quite a while. But now that I look back at it, it wasn't that long. But it did seem at the time like it was forever.

You know, it was like, OK, I'm ready to go home. I mean, nothing against the hospital or anything, but it's a hospital. You kind of want to be home.

The whole hospital is for resting and getting better. I got better, but I wasn't resting. That's for sure.

DOEBELE: Were you – what physically happened to you during that time? How many – did you have to have more operations?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: I had a ton of operations. I had – a lot of my operations were internal. I had to have a lot of stuff repaired, like intestines.

And, you know, I had a couple of problems with – you know, I had a colostomy bag at the time. So, they – I actually was fortunate enough where they could remove it. So, that took a while, but I had to get better for it.

And then, just a lot of scar tissue that they had to clean up. And fortunately, I didn't have too many surgeries afterwards, but it was quite a bit of them.

I had a lot of infections that they had to take care of, so a lot the – a lot of the procedures were actually just going in there and making sure everything stayed – I guess disinfected is the best way to put it.

But, I mean, they would describe it, and I was kind of like, "So, you guys are kind of pretty much cleaning out." Like, yes.

Well, why didn't you say that? I didn't need a 20-minute explanation.

DOEBELE: But, so, you had to have a reverse colonoscopy.

MENDOZA VALENCIA: Yes, I did. And ...

DOEBELE: Colostomy, excuse me.

MENDOZA VALENCIA: Yes.

DOEBELE: A reverse colostomy.

MENDOZA VALENCIA: Yes. Because I had one, because originally my injuries were so bad, and pretty much, I had a lot of internal injuries, that it was just safer and easier for them to do that.

And I personally, really, when I found out about it, that I had one, I was like, "I what?"

You know, it was kind of like one of those, hold on a minute. I already have gone through this. And I've got to go through this, too?

Oh, no, no, no, no.

So, I mean, I really, really prayed a lot and hoped a lot. And, you know, finally when they said – you know, they gave me the clear. “Yes, we can reverse it.”

I was like, OK, cool. What date? Let's get this going, you know. I can go through the week-and-a-half of pain for it, and let's just get this done.

DOEBELE: So, all of that was for your internal injuries from your chest being open for ...

MENDOZA VALENCIA: Yes.

DOEBELE: ... a couple of months.

MENDOZA VALENCIA: Yes, it was open for a long time.

Every couple of days they'd come in and just start tightening up the clamps and everything to bring everything closer together. It was just – from what my doctor told me, it was “Every time we try to close you up, you start bleeding too much. And that becomes a problem.”

And I was like, OK. And this is something that we're trying, so we're going to go ahead and, I guess, be the guinea pig. And they put – they started the procedure with me, and they put this kind of like mesh. First my – what wasn't protected at the time. And then all the muscle and everything grew over it.

So, I have a mesh lining in my abdomen. So, it's there. It's permanent. I know I'm like, “Are you guys going to take it out?”

“No, it's there for life.”

Good to know. So ...

DOEBELE: And that was to help bring the whole body back together again?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: Yes. And it was also easier to help to prevent infection, because, you know, just having something open like that, anything could get in there and just cause any kind of problems.

And it worked, you know. I mean, I've heard that it's done quite a bit now. But it's kind of surprising to find out you're one of the early case studies about stuff like that.

DOEBELE: And what about your legs? How many operations did you have to have there?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: A lot of the operations were just like a – just to keep everything disinfected and make sure everything closed up. And I think the most painful thing of all was when they had to remove the blood vacuole (ph) things that absorbed all the excess blood of your injuries. That was not fun getting those things removed. It was very – the best way I could put it, it was like a hot poker being removed.

And when you look at it, it was like – it's just this tube lining that's like this big. And it's like, OK. That was in there? And you kind of like really think about it.

But, I mean, just when it comes out, they're like, “Just take a deep breath.” And you really hope they get it the first time they yank it out.

So, I mean, pretty painful, but once it's out, I'm glad it's out. I mean, I had one more surgery here at home where they just fixed up old scars, because I was having a lot of discomfort issues. And they had put one of those in, and I'm like, "Oh, God. I know how this feels."

So, when the doctor kept talking to me, I'm like, "No, you don't understand. I remember."

So, you know, a lot of that stuff I do remember. And it's – you know, luckily, I haven't had too many surgeries since then.

DOEBELE: Where do you go for your treatment, now that you're back home in California?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: I go to the Army VA center over here in Martinez. It's about half an hour to a 45-minute drive – depending on traffic.

And I actually like it, because it's a little bit out of the way, and I get to go, you know, drive up there, see my doctor or see my nutritionist, see, you know, all the other doctors I have to see.

But it's gotten to the point where it's like once a month, if that, or I haven't seen my real doctor in maybe six months. So, I mean, I haven't had really severe problems that I have had to go see them, you know. Mostly it's just going up there once a month and seeing my nutritionist and getting weighed in and stuff like that, and making sure I'm where I'm supposed to be.

But for the most part, it's not too bad.

DOEBELE: And why a nutritionist?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: I personally was feeling like I had gained too much weight between Walter Reed and then coming here, and then trying to get settled into a normal life. And I was just like not feeling too healthy.

So, I went to the nutritionist. And I told my doctor first, "I'm not feeling all that great. And I think it might be my eating habits, or something."

So, I went to the nutritionist. We came up with a plan, and it's been working. I'm losing weight gradually, and everything.

And then, you know, physical therapy helps out, too. But it's not like Walter Reed where I was going every day. Here it's like I go twice a week. And I have to reset my schedules at work, just so I can make it.

And, you know, and exactly, working in an office is not the most active environment half the time. But, I mean, if it's a pretty bad day, you're running around quite a bit.

DOEBELE: Where do you go for your physical therapy?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: Actually, my physical therapist is only – believe it or not – three blocks away. It's down the hill from where I live, and it's right next to a theater, and next to the Safeway on San Ramon Valley Boulevard, which is like the main strip here in the San Ramon Valley.

DOEBELE: So, it's private.

MENDOZA VALENCIA: It's private, but the government pays for it. They subsidize it, because it's not really effective for me to go all the way to Martinez, you know, for therapy for an hour, because I pretty much lose half a day driving there, going in there, getting ready, coming back and then going to work. So, it was like, my job is not exactly one where I can disappear for that long.

I mean, I can disappear once in a while, but not every-other day. So, I mean, it worked out pretty good. And I haven't been in there a couple of weeks. With stuff at work, it's just been hectic. So, I've had to rearrange stuff. But I try to make it as much as possible.

DOEBELE: What kind of physical therapy do you do?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: A lot of it is just, you know, upper body work, making sure I'm still kind of limber and – I mean, I move around quite a bit, so I stay pretty active cardially.

Most of the time it's just making sure they keep my core strength really good, you know, and doing a lot of abdominals and pushups, and stuff like that.

But I mean, I do a lot of that stuff here at home, too, you know, just because I might not go there one day, but I might feel like I need it. So, it's not like when I had legs. It was like, oh, I'm not feeling too good. Let me go for a three-mile run, and come back and be like, OK, I feel better.

You know, so, I mean, you've got to kind of invent things to come up with against that burning feeling kind of thing going on. And I mean, I've got a pushup bar and pull-up bar in between my room and my wall. So I kind of get like pulling a couple in there. And every once in a while, if I feel really good, I'm like, OK, today's a punishment day. Any time I have to go into there or go near the closet, I have to hit it.

So, you know, I do that every once in a while. And of course, then by the end of the day I'm like, why did I do that?

And then it's like, OK. We did our part, so we're good. We can splurge a little bit. And then it'd just go from there.

DOEBELE: Where do you work?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: I work at AT&T. But when I first started there, at the time it was SBC. It was before the big, you know – well, we call it buyout, but it was a hostile takeover in reality. But, I mean, we went in there and bought the place up.

But, yes, it was SBC. Originally before that, here in California, it used to be called Pacific Bell. And even way, way before that, it was AT&T originally again. So, it's kind of like really funny, because, you know, it was a full circle kind of thing. And a lot of the older people in my work always say that. You know, it's like "I remember when it was Pac Bell." Or, you know, "I started at AT&T. Now it's AT&T again, and I'm retiring."

It's like, oh. Well, I've got 23 years left. So, we'll see.

DOEBELE: What do you do?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: I'm a project manager for the Bay, which actually includes most of San Francisco, East Shore, which is the Oakland-Hayward area, a lot of the valley area here, which is out, Pleasanton, Hayward, Livermore. And then I do – recently, I just got San Jose and Mill (ph) (INAUDIBLE) and Palo Alto.

So, I mean, I took a big chunk out of it, because we had this major reorganization in the whole California organization. So, it was kind of like, "OK, you're doing fine with that. Let's give you this."

And I was like, oh, great. OK.

So, like, does that come with a pay raise?

No. Like, fine.

DOEBELE: What kind of projects are we talking about?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: I worked in a high cap department, which is high capacity circuits. It's pretty much – we put in like phone lines and data lines in for businesses. Like your checkout counters at the Safeway, you know, the card readers. We put those in so they can, you know, the minute you slide it in, the information is going to the credit card company, and they're getting their information back saying you're approved or denied.

I mean, we deal with a really fast information transfer with that.

And our department kind of also builds the cell towers that you see everywhere. We build those for like T-Mobile, MCI, all those other places, you know. We build even our own for AT&T mobility.

So, we're always doing projects everywhere, and it's kind of a lot of monitoring dates and working with different groups. And like, OK, we put it out. Now you guys got to do this. Then it's like, "We have a problem. It didn't work."

It's like, "OK, OK. We'll get the engineer. Hold on."

And, you know, a lot of – I call it a lot of crash maintenance in the afternoon. In the morning it's a lot of meetings and a lot of reports, and a lot of, you know, talking to different people. And then, as soon as I come back from lunch it's like, OK, let the chaos begin, you know. I might be here till six, but, you know, it's everybody calling like, "This order's due today." And it's like, "OK. Hold on."

It's like, "Oh, you couldn't get there? OK. It's the customer's fault. We've got it. OK. Don't worry."

So, I mean, it's a lot of doing that. And you have a lot of people that's – they're going to die if they don't get it in.

I mean, it seems unrealistic, but sometimes they're just calling you with such panic, you're just like, OK. We'll deal with it. All right. Bye.

But I mean, I like it. I mean, it keeps me busy and it's – I'm one of those people that I need stress to have a functioning day.

I mean, four days of vacation's great a week, and it's kind of like, I should be back at the office or doing something. There's somebody I need to be talking to. There's a conference call I need to be on, or I'm late for. So, there's a lot of that stuff.

And, I mean, I like it. It's not the Army, but it's close to it.

DOEBELE: How close? What was it about the Army? Was there anything about the Army that translated into this job?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: There's a lot of retired military at AT&T, especially here in California. There's also a lot of retired or – oh, I would say inactive Guard, too. So, a lot of the people that work there, I mean – a couple of my friends that I have there, they're all ex-military. So, either Navy, Marines or whatever, you know.

My boss, she's actually ex-Air Force. So, it's kind of funny, because you're like, wow, this place is really structured like an Army structure, you know, a military structure.

You've got your managers, your craft people, and then you've got your second levels, area managers, district managers. You've got your vice presidents, and then you've got the presidents. And then by that point you're like, "Yes, I don't want the suits to come down to my area."

Kind of like it when it's just us normal managers down here. So ...

DOEBELE: How many people work for you?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: Right now, I have 10 people working for me. I administer a group that, you know, that works with my project managing, you know. It was – the position opened up, and it was like you already know what the job is. You're already doing part of it. Why don't you just take the people and manage them?

And it was like, OK.

But it's a little bit more different, because it's a lot more rules involved. It's union issues, and things get involved that you have to, like, be really careful about.

So, I mean, it keeps me on my toes – relatively speaking. But I mean, a lot of times my people are very good to work with, and I get along with them. They actually – I think they kind of like me.

But I mean, most of the time, they're really good. And I try to just make sure that they get taken care of. Same things I did with my Joes in the Army.

DOEBELE: Any time in which that you have felt that the people who work for you treat you differently, because you don't have any legs?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: Not really, because, I mean – let's put it this way. Everybody makes jokes where I work. And we pretty much rag on everybody. I mean, if you did something, and we find out about it, you're number's done. I mean, that day you're done.

And there are days where it's my turn, you know. And it just so happens, like I was like – just the other day I was like, oh, I had to run down to the other end of the building. And they're like, "Run?"

I'm like, "OK. I mean roll."

It's like, uh-uh, David (ph), you're done. And then, you know, they start playing with it. And then next thing you know, it's like – or there have been days that are like, "Oh, man. I put my foot in my mouth."

And they're like, "Are you sure about that?"

"I can go home and get it, and bring it to work. OK?" So, we can do that.

So, I mean, my friends, and everything, they all kind of knew I'm not very, very sensitive about it. I feel that, you know, it happened. I have to have a sense of humor about it. And I make fun about it.

And a lot of people sometimes get surprised at how much I'm willing to take it. I've taken it to the very far extreme, and people have been like, "Are you sure that's OK?"

And it's like, "It's me. I don't care. It's funny. It was worth the joke," you know.

And so, it was like, OK.

So, I mean, it just really depends. And I think you've got to have a sense of humor about it. I mean, I could be serious the whole time and just be miserable, or I can have fun and play with it and be friends – you know, be with my friends and people at work. And a lot of them, they're OK with it. A lot of them don't notice it.

I have a nickname at work every once in a while that people don't like to use. It's Hot Wheels. Just because I zoom past people and I don't make a noise. Usually, you know, in their office, you can hear people, like the clacking of the heels or, you know, people walking.

I'm just going to one point or another. It was like, OK. I'm next in line. If he's a cop (ph), or (ph), get out of my way, you know.

So, it's kind of stuff like that. And then every once in a while, making sharps turns, it's like, OK. I feel like I'm driving again.

But, I mean, it's kind of what happens when you live in like a cubicle kind of environment, too. So, I like it, and it's fun. You know, it makes fun jokes.

And, you know, we get to play around quite a bit, but we get to work our butts off a lot of times, too.

DOEBELE: How did you get your job?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: A program called the Sentinels of Freedom. They actually saw the previous interview, and they wanted to meet me. And they offered me the scholarship. At first I was kind of like, "Are you sure that you want me?"

You know, it was kind of like, OK. And then it was like, "You're going to do what?"

And that was, you know, "We're going to help you buy a car, fully adaptable. Can get you an apartment rent-free for four years. We're going to help you get a job, and we're going to help you go back to school."

And I was like, "Am I dreaming? Does someone need to wake me up here?"

So, it was a lot moments where it was like, OK. This is real. And I guess I didn't really get that until I got here. And then, they had the big welcome ceremony for me. And I was like, OK. Wow.

And then, it's funny, because you know I see them all the time, and I still am part of the group. We do a lot of fund raising. We do a lot of events.

And we're always helping other Joes, too, that get injured, and bring them here and help them out, or wherever they want to go.

And it's just weird, because every once in a while I run into people and they're like, hi. And I'm like, oh, God. I met them somewhere but I forgot where. And it's like, "Hi."

And it's kind of funny, because San Ramon's not a big city. And there's so many close cities by it, that it's – you run into everybody every once in a while. And I mean, it's kind of funny, too, because my best friend, Tim, he grew up here. He's from here. And usually I'm with him half the time. And we're either hanging out or we're going out to dinner with his family or my family.

And next thing you know, it's kind of like, "Tim, do we know him?" "I thought you knew him."

"Well, they know us, apparently."

So, it's like, "OK, David, just don't say anything. We're going to figure it out."

DOEBELE: Is Tim an old buddy? Or is he a military?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: He's a friend that I made here through work. And we just hit it off, and we had a lot of things in common. We both play video games, both love sci-fi. We both make jokes and just take it to the extreme.

I mean, we're always picking on people, and we're always getting picked on, too. And then it's kind of like, well, you know, just this morning he made this statement.

I told him, "Don't go see this movie. It was really, really bad."

He's like, "Oh, really? I wasn't even going to watch it, because it was a dumb movie anyway."

So, I'm like, "But I told my sister-in-law."

And I'm like, what?

And it's like, yes. And then she's like, oh, oh, oh. And then, finally when I told her it was you, it was like, oh, it was him?

So, it was kind of like, oh, that's right. She did meet me that time.

So, I mean, you know, we kind of get to meet everybody. And it's a big area, but a lot of people know each other quite well, so it's kind of fun. And you run into a lot of people sometimes, too. I mean, I run into my mayor all the time at Safeway.

So, it's like, "Oh, hey, mayor. What are you going here? Oh, I see you grocery shop like the rest of us."

So, it's kind of funny, too. I mean, you kind of run into everybody here every once in a while.

DOEBELE: How did Sentinels of Freedom get started?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: Actually, it was this gentleman called Mike Conklin. All three of his sons are in the military, all Rangers. And he kind of was reading what was happening, and felt like something needed to be done.

So, he organized everything. And Mike's those type of people that you don't say no to. And if you do, he's going to keep coming back until you say yes. It might take like 30 times, but he will say yes.

So, he got all these different groups and corporations and everything to get involved, and just made it happen. And then, a lot of people locally that, you know, San Ramon and in Danville, Dublin (ph), all have this great community of retired military people.

And from Army, Navy, Air Force, everyone. I mean, all the different combats, too.

And he got them all involved. He was like, "Well, you're a general. You know somebody over there. You've got to know somebody. Generals just don't know nobody."

So, it was kind of like, OK.

So, and then, it just started again (ph) happening. And I think what really made it happen was, is that at the time they had – and they still do – is a retired teacher (ph) general, General Roland Lowe (ph). And he still had a lot of contacts in the Pentagon. And he contacted them, and he told them, "Listen. This is for real. We want to do this, and we're willing to put this into it."

And every time that they've come up to bat for anybody, they've really gone all the way. And it's a really big military program that they support the Sentinels. I mean, even the Wounded Warrior program support them. I mean, my caseworker knows almost all the Sentinels, so it's kind of, you know, you can get away, but you can't really get away.

DOEBELE: So, Mike Conklin went to AT&T and said, will you give a job to ...

MENDOZA VALENCIA: Yes. He had a – yes, he had a meeting, and he asked them, "We had a vet."

At the time they didn't know it was me. So, "We've got a vet. We're going to bring him in. Do you guys want to say yes?"

And at the time it was one of our vice presidents, Byrons McDaniels (ph), who said, "Yes, we'll give him a job. We'll train him."

And I got my job, you know. So, I met my boss. It took me a while to learn everything and used to, back to nine-to-five, so to say, and getting really into the, you know, rat race, so, to me.

And, I mean, I picked it up pretty quick. They were surprised. And, I mean, at first it was a little bit uncomfortable, because they weren't sure what to say, what they can say, what – you know – and kind of learned together what I could do and what I couldn't do.

And now I'm just – it's like everybody else. Here it is three years later and it's like, oh, OK. And it's like – I mean, most of the time I'm mostly like – I'll ask somebody. “Hey, dude, you've got legs. Can you reach that for me? I mean, it's a little out of my range.”

And they're like, “Sure, you want me now.”

You know, I mean, it's stuff like that we do. And they're a pretty cool bunch of people there.

DOEBELE: How did the Sentinels help you find this apartment?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: They had already everything set out. That was what was amazing. Before I even got here, they already had the apartment ready and everything. I mean, I bought some more stuff and furnished it a little bit more myself. But mostly everything in the apartment was fully furnished. I mean, down to kitchenware, like pots and pans, everything.

DOEBELE: Did they have to retrofit the house?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: They made slight modifications, yes. I mean, they asked Chappell (ph) Building. You know, they build the homes and a lot of apartments here in California. They're like, OK. They just need to lower the sink, and they need to do this, and they needed that.

And they did. I mean, the sink in the bathroom's lower. The sink in the kitchen is lower.

DOEBELE: So, then that company stepped up and did ...

MENDOZA VALENCIA: And then did it. And they ...

DOEBELE: ... gratis

MENDOZA VALENCIA: Yes. They said, OK, we'll do it. And it was all donated. They donated four years rent-free apartment. And that's kind of unheard of, you know. And it's like, whoa.

So, I mean, it's kind of nice, you know. And it's – you know, it's saving up my money for eventually buying a house or a condo, or something. You know, something a little bit more spacious. It's just a one-room apartment.

It's good for me, but when I get family over, it kind of – it starts getting cramped, especially with my niece, you know, a two-year-old running around. It's kind of like base (ph). There's no room to run around here. Slow down.

So, I mean, it's just amazing how many people have come forward, and especially big corporations.

I know a couple of the other recipients; one of them has worked at Wells Fargo as a bank teller. Another works at Chevron. And I mean, a couple of them now work at the police station here in San Ramon. So, I mean, it's kind of hard to get away from anybody and not know that they're there, you know.

I mean, just let alone where the police station and Chevron and, you know, the bank and AT&T are kind of all within the same block. So it's kind of like we run into each other quite a bit.

And it's just pretty cool. I mean, you give up a lot of things for the military. But then, the military gives you so much back. And you kind of take it with you.

And it's kind of funny, because you kind of start noticing people who are in the military. And you kind of like start becoming their friends, too. I mean, I don't know how many people are like, "Were you in the Army?"

And I'm like, "Yes. Were you?"

Like, "Yes."

And like, next thing you know, six months down the line you're like, "Oh, hey, we're going out to the bar for happy hour."

"Oh, OK."

So, next thing you know, you're making friends with everybody. So, I mean, it's really interesting how something like that could get you in common with everybody else. So ...

DOEBELE: The vehicle, how did they help you with that?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: The vehicle is like the most amazing thing, probably, for me. Just because, for me it was a shock. I'm like, how am I going to drive? How am I going to get to work? Am I going to have to have my mom or my dad, or somebody pretty much give up their life to drive me around?

And having the car – well, actually, in this case my van – is pretty much the most single thing that I really would need, because it gives me my independence.

And it's an amazing vehicle, because, I mean, everything's powered. I mean, the doors open, they're powered. The ramp comes out powered. So, I mean, I can get in and out – not very quickly, just because you have to wait for the ramp to lift up and to come down. But, I mean, once I'm in and out, it's – I'm out. I'm gone.

Most of my friends say, "You drive pretty crazy."

I'm like, "No, I don't. I drive like I always have. You just notice it more, because I'm driving differently."

So, for the most part, it's probably the best that I could ever ask for. And ...

DOEBELE: How do you handle the accelerator and the brakes?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: With my left hand. You push down to accelerate, and you push in to push the brakes.

And the brake pedal is still there, so anybody can drive the vehicle, but the rod in the back is what connects everything, so it moves by my hand.

But it's weird, because it's even more touchy, because your hand controls – you know, your hand can do so much more movements than your legs can. And it's so much more fine-tuned, that, you know, sometimes I forget. OK. I'm giving it way too much gas for this turn, so I've got to slow it down.

So, I mean, whereas in a car you kind of have a little bit more of a leeway with, you know, if you were using the pedals.

And, you know, I still get (ph) some (ph) used to, but I've been known to cut a turn pretty sharply and get a couple of people turning. But for the most part, it's really, really good.

I think the vehicle itself is probably the single most amazing thing that I've ever seen being made, because when I was a kid, you grow up and you're like, you kind of need your feet to drive. So, how do you drive without them?

And, you know, that's one of the things you were thinking of in the hospital. And it's like, "How am I supposed to get around now? How am I supposed to do this?"

Especially living in California, where it's like, you need to drive to go anywhere.

So, I mean, that was another thing to get used to. But it's a godsend, I think, that they came up with those controls. And they're so accommodating.

DOEBELE: Do you have – it has a nickname?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: Yes.

DOEBELE: What is it?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: My friends have christened it the Gray Whale. And it's not really gray. It's like an off-green color. But it's so big. And it's a Ford Econoline. And it's great. I love it. But it is big.

It's kind of intimidating out on the road, too. But, I mean, it's a monster of a whale to get around in. And I mean, I'd love a minivan, just because it'd be more economical, but, you know, the Sentinels helped pay for it, and I put in my VA grant money for it, and so, I don't have a car payment. All I pay is my insurance money.

And that's kind of nice, not having that big check every month you have to write out. And like, there's go a concert. Or, you know, there goes a weekend in Vegas.

But, you know, it's pretty amazing.

DOEBELE: What's it cost you to fill it up?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: OK, here in California recently, I filled it up for \$68 on regular. I used to fill it up that much with super.

So, it's gotten pretty bad in the last couple of months. And, you know, I keep hearing it's going to get worse. So, it's like, might not need to be taking any trips this summer. Might be a lot more, you know, going online and playing with friends.

So, it's kind of like, you know, I've been watching it a little bit more, whereas a year ago, most of us would go out more for everything. And I'd be like, it's five o'clock. Anybody got to be home? Let's go out to dinner and movie. OK.

So, you know, we'd drive out, everybody in their own car. And now it's kind of like, yes, who's driving there? All right. We're carpooling. Let's go.

So, I mean, it's a little bit of a change, but, yes, the price is the big thing.

DOEBELE: When we talked to you in March of 2005, you said that you were going home from Walter Reed. And one of the reasons you were going to go home was because you wanted to spend more time with your brothers and your sister. How has that worked out?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: It's worked out pretty well. I mean, they're close enough where they can show up, and I get kind of a warning. But I mean, you know, with them going to school and everything, it's more on the weekends and everything like that.

Definitely at the beginning, they were here more often. But as we got more used to it, and I got a little more independent and made more friends, and things like that, they do show up quite a bit. I mean, Maggie is here right now, because she's on summer vacation. So, she'll probably spend a week, you know, with my mom.

And they show up quite a bit on weekends, or it's usually like, we need to go to the mall. We need to go somewhere. And it's like, OK, come on down and we'll go. We'll do it.

Or it's like, I got tickets to go see something. Why don't we all go together?

So, I mean, we try to do a lot of family activities and a lot of like, you know, hey the movie came out, and it's family, so let's go watch it. And we'll go watch it as a family. We do a lot of stuff like that together.

I mean, there are a lot of times that it's like, well, we just show up to hang out. I'm like, OK. Well, we've got a Wii. We've got a PlayStation, and I've got Internet, you know, so let's – we can hang out and just chill out.

I mean, they love coming down here, because, you know, Boonville is kind of a country town, you know. We're ...

DOEBELE: That's your hometown, Boonville?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: Yes, it is. And I mean, I love Boonville, but this town don't even have a stoplight. It's one road in and one road out.

DOEBELE: Didn't you tell me it had a drive-in?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: Yes, it has a drive-in, the infamous drive-in, which I've actually heard the hours have changed, and they don't stay open as late as I used to. And I was like, "God, I remember working there till midnight. And now you tell me they close earlier?"

DOEBELE: Do you go back there? Have you ever been back there?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: I've been back there a couple of times. I actually went back there a couple of weekends ago, because it was my goddaughter's baptism, and my niece's baptism, too. So, we went, and we did all that and had a big party. And we had lots of fun.

I had to come back the next day. And a friend of mine needed a ride back to the city, so I was like, OK, well, we'll stay till five, and we'll have a barbecue and everything that my parents do every Sunday. And then we'll go home. And, you know, we stayed there Saturday, Sunday and came back.

And it was fun and relaxing and everything, but it's a two-and-a-half-hour drive. So, I mean, it can be a little bit out there to go out there every day.

I mean, for me, it's more fun to be around here in the city, or close to the city. And, you know, I'm hungry. Well, there's always someplace to go. Or I'm bored. Let's go to Border's, or let's go to the library. Or let's go to the movies. Or let's just go hang out at their (ph) friends' house.

You know, it's kind of a little bit like that. Whereas, you know, Boonville, it's a little bit more low-key. It's a lot quieter. I mean, it's great for when I'm over-stressed and I just want to relax. I go home.

But it's having the comforts of everything that I'm used to here. It gets hard to go back there every-other weekend.

DOEBELE: What was it like the first time you went back to the drive-in, after working there for so many years? You said it was a kind of a hangout for you.

Was it different after going through what you've been through?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: It wasn't different because of what I went through. It was different because not everybody that I grew up with was there anymore, you know. Not everybody who worked there when I worked there was kind of still there, you know.

I mean, most of the kids that worked there were from the high school, so it was kind of always changing. I was one of the few people that worked there two years, you know, straight through. And it was like my senior year I came around and I quit. It's like, I'm having fun.

So, you know, it was pretty cool. And then, they did a lot of remodeling, so it kind of wasn't the same place I was used to and where I worked, and where I used to hang out.

And the town has changed quite a bit. I mean, some things have been added on here and there. Some things have gotten bigger, and then a lot more people have moved in, too.

So, it was kind of – the other thing that was weird was like, you know, I was always asking my sister, “Sis, who's that?”

I don't know them. I didn't go to high school with any of them or any of their kids.

So, it was kind of like, you know, that kind of thing. And it's not exactly the same town I grew up in. But it's still home, you know. I go home every once in a while, and it's fun.

But, I mean, San Ramon is kind of my home now, mostly. And I've got a lot – all of my friends here. I mean, a lot of my really, really close friends are here. And we always hang out or are calling each other.

You know, just the other day, it was Saturday. I actually went into the office for a couple of hours. And one of my friends called me up. It's like, “Hey, dude. We're doing dinners over at this place.”

I'm like, “Really?”

And so, “Yes. You want to show up?”

“Yes. Save me a chair and I'll be there.” And it's like, “Save you a chair? Come on.”

“You know what I mean. I'll be there in 20 minutes. OK?”

So, I showed up and we had dinner. And it was just their family and me. So, we're always doing stuff like that.

So, I mean, this is kind of home for me now. But it's great to go back to where I used to – you know, where I grew up, where I used to go down to the creek and throw rocks at, you know, where we used to camping, where we used to go hiking at.

So, I mean, it's a lot more country, so I can't do exactly a lot of the stuff I used to do. But, I mean, it's fun to go and be home and just relax.

But it's still the country. But I like it.

I just – San Ramon is my home for right now, and probably for the near future. Hopefully, for the further future, too.

DOEBELE: You had – well, we talked a lot about you becoming a citizen.

MENDOZA VALENCIA: Yes. That was a big thing for me. I still remember it every once in a while, because, you know, we're always cracking jokes. Everywhere I go people are saying, you know, you're cracking jokes. And that's just my thing now.

And wasn't this funny when I was before this, just because I was a little bit more serious? But kind of let a lot of stuff go. And I always like to say, yes, you know, hey, I became a citizen. I earned my right.

And it was – to me, that was probably like one of the single proudest moments I ever had in my life, was putting my hand up again, but this time swearing in and saying, “Yes, I fought for this country, and I’m now part of it.”

And that to me just was – like, I had such emotion and everything, that it was just overwhelming. And it was like – I guess this is how it is when you maybe have a kid, or anything like that. But, you know, I mean, I’ve seen my niece born and everything. And it didn’t compare like that to me. But I guess it wasn’t, because it wasn’t my kid. It was my sister’s kid.

But, I mean, it was something that I was just really proud of. It was – still to this day, I remember the ceremony. I mean, I remember the whole row of cameras and everything. I’m like, how many news people are going to be here?

That was the one thing that got me about the whole thing, too, was that how many – the press coverage alone on it was like, wow, who isn’t here? And that was what was so shocking to me, because it was like, I just wanted to become a citizen for something that I fought for.

And, you know, now it’s kind of celebrity status, I guess you could say, for a little while there. I mean, a lot of people knew me and heard me, and I got crazy letters from everybody. And it was like, I got a couple of marriage proposals, too. So, it was like, OK. That was – didn’t see that coming.

So, I mean, it was – a lot of crazy stuff happened from it. And it was just a really happy moment for me, and something I really remember all the time, and just how happy and proud I felt that day.

DOEBELE: Did you follow up on any of those marriage proposals?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: You know, at the time, it wasn’t even a thought in my mind. And now, I know, being back out there dating again, it’s just like, maybe I should have considered some of those, because there’s some people out there that are kind of like – you’re not very smart, to say the least. Or, you know, like common sense didn’t rub off on this generation, you know.

But a lot of the people I’ve been going out with are my cousins have been hooking me up. And she goes to college, and her college friends aren’t that smart. And they don’t have a – I wouldn’t say that smart. They’re probably book smart, but they’re not life smart. So, that’s kind of a little bit of an offshoot. So, it’s kind of ...

DOEBELE: How old are you now?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: Twenty-seven. I am 27 years old. I actually came to that realization the other day, too, when my back started hurting. And I’m like, oh, my God. I’m old.

And it was like, I could remember when I could just go on two hours of sleep a night for a month, and I’d be fine. And now it’s like, it’s 11:30. I need to be in bed. I’ve got to be up at six. Not – this is – no.

So, a lot of times, you know, that’s when I started to realize it. And it was like, yes, I’m getting old. But I’m still a 45-year-old in a 25-year-old’s body.

A lot of my goals right now are like, OK, set the money aside to buy a house or a condo. Start getting my money around for my 401k, you know. OK. I got a promotion at work. I got a little bit of a pay raise. OK, put that all towards the 401k.

So, I mean, I look at some of my other friends, and it’s kind of like, OK, you’re 45 and you’re barely starting your 401k? Ouch.

And it’s, you know, my mindset is already on that path, you know. Luckily, I’m fortunate that I got all my partying and crazy teenaged angst out of the way, that I don’t regret it. But there are some things I miss.

DOEBELE: Like what?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: Going to clubs and dancing. I loved that. That was my big thing. It was always Saturday or Sunday. It's 10 o'clock. Guess we should go to the club.

So, you know, going to the club and going with your girlfriend, or going with a bunch of friends. That's probably like one of the things I miss the most. And snowboarding and surfing, probably.

I was pretty good at ice-skating. I mean, I could go around in the circle, but I mean, that was proud (ph) enough for me.

But stuff like that, you know, things like that that I miss. Jogging every once in a while. I used to get really good. It'd clear my head when I jogged. And I kind of miss that. But you find other ways to do it.

DOEBELE: How do you clear your head today?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: Today I clear my head by playing a lot of video games. You know, just get the stress out, you know. It's funny, too, because some of my friends at work are like my friends from like the comic book shop. Or people I hang out will be like, "Bad day?"

"Yes."

Get your (INAUDIBLE) and play – and I'm not like promoting any single game here, but "You want to play (INAUDIBLE) online?"

"Yep."

"All right. I'll meet you there in 20 minutes. OK."

DOEBELE: Now, where is this you go?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: And this is – you know, we just – it's online playing.

DOEBELE: Oh, I see .

MENDOZA VALENCIA: You know, you hook up your computers and they talk to each other, and you're playing online. And you get the headset and you're like, OK, this game brings me back to the Army days. And then, a lot of it's just, you know, you're just going out there and relieving stress.

And after awhile you're just like, it's been an hour. I'm good. You going to play? Yes, I guess. Well, OK. Bye.

And that kind of stresses you out (ph) and really takes everything out, you know, especially when you've had a hard day at work, and you're just like – man, I hate the vice presidents. They're coming up with stuff that doesn't even matter, or, you know, changing rules that shouldn't be changed.

So, I mean, the same thing as in the Army. I used to get stuff to relieve the stress, and everything like that. And in the Army it was kind of like, well, there's always a club near post. So, it was going out and have a couple of drinks. And a lot of times with friends – it just depends who I am with that day. Some friends like to play video games. Some friends like to go out and have dinner and have a couple of drinks.

So, I mean, it just depends what I'm in the mood for. But there was always something to relieve the tension and everything like that.

DOEBELE: Do you still drink?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: Very occasionally. I don't heavily drink, even though if you looked at my cabinet, there's quite a bit with assorted collection. But a lot of that, believe it or not, is people have given me like bottles, and stuff like that, and for Christmas, and stuff like that.

But generally, if I'm drinking, it's because I'm going out to dinner. Or like, we're having a late lunch, or something like that, and it's like on a Saturday or Sunday, you know, or a special occasion. Someone got a 35-year at the company, or something like that.

So, you know, it's kind of things like that. I really don't heavily drink, or drink by myself. Or if I do drink, it's usually a social event, you know, or I'm going to like a charity event, or I get invited to a dinner party, you know. If it's something like that, I usually drink, but it's maybe one or two, because usually I end up driving myself home. So, it's not really like I can, like, "Yea, let's party."

And I'm, you know, seeing some of the stuff my brother sees on TV, and it's stuff, it's like MTV gone wild in Cancun. OK. Why did I do that stuff? You know. Kind of, you know, the maturity factor kicks in. You're just like, why did I ever think that was fun?

DOEBELE: But some veterans have come back, and particularly some who have suffered disabilities or have lost limbs, have had a problem with alcohol or drugs, or any kind of that.

Does that ever concern you? Just because ...

MENDOZA VALENCIA: It just – it concerns me, because I do have to use pain medication every once in a while. And it's – you know, Tylenol works most of the time, but there are days where, you know, like phantom pain will kick in every once in a while.

And for me, luckily, I'm fortunate where it doesn't kick in that often, because I live in California, and it's a very warm climate most of the time of the year. But when it does rain and stuff with that, it's kind of like, you know, you start feeling it.

I always play up the joke. Dang those dogs in Iraq. They're chewing on my legs again, you know.

So, you know – and usually my friends are like, "Are you OK?"

"Yes."

"Because you're kind of cringing."

And like, yes, just get me my bottle of pills, you know. And they usually know where I keep them in my desk, and they'll probably give me one, and 20 minutes later I'm fine.

Alcohol is not too much of a problem, because most of my friends and stuff are social drinkers. We don't drink by ourselves. Kind of need each other to drink.

And then, some of us – and, you know, my friends don't drink. You know, they're very devoted Christians. They don't drink, don't swear. But we just – we know what we can do with each other, and stuff like that.

So, it's never been a problem with me. And even on my heavy drinking days in the Army, I always kind of knew where to cut it off.

And, I mean, I think it kind of has to do a little bit with my culture, where alcohol wasn't a big deal in our family, and especially going to Mexico, you know, spending every-other summer in Mexico with your grandparents, and it'd be like liquor being readily available. It just became – it's something else to do, but I don't feel like doing it.

And, I mean, we kind of – my sister and I, we both got into a mindset where it's just like, we don't need to drink to have fun, but a nice drink now and then is OK.

And fortunately, I haven't had any problems with depression, severe depression. There are days, you know, where it's like, yes, I wish I had my legs back and I could stand, and, you know, stuff like that. But I mean, it's not to the

point where I really need a drink and, you know, shove a bottle of pills, you know. Fortunately, I have never had to go that far.

DOEBELE: When we talked in 2005, you were very close to remembering getting off all that pain medication, and you talked about how difficult that was and how painful it was.

MENDOZA VALENCIA: I think that's the other motivation, too. It's detoxing. A lot of people don't realize that there is side effects to having those heavy pain medications. I mean, having that button readily available for, you know, I can feel – I'm starting to feel something. You know, OK. There goes the morphine or the vidacain (ph), or whatever.

Coming off of that is very hard. I mean, it's – the best way I can put it is, it's like seeing someone detoxing. And it's very painful. It's very – it's very painful, and it is very, very depressing, too, because you're – for so long, the pain medication was keeping stuff in. Now you're just feeling stuff that you hadn't felt in a while. And you're – I mean, not just emotionally, but like physically.

And it just becomes really, really hard. And I mean, the cold sweats were probably the worst for me. I mean, I was just like, I'm freezing, but I can't stop sweating.

And, you know, you see all these movies where you see like people trying to detox, and it's like, oh, my God. That is true. And it really is a very painful process.

And I think going through that once was just enough for me to be to the point where I never want to be to that point again, where I can possibly have to detox and be that bad again. And it was a miserable couple of months for me, just detoxing. And it was coming off a lot of medication.

And I needed it at the time, but then when the doctor said, "You're starting to feel better. I'm going to wean you off," I didn't realize when they meant, you know, it's going to be very difficult.

And it was one of probably the most difficult things I've had to go through, because it was a couple of months there where I was just really, really intense and, you know, just like – you can't sleep. You can't eat. Of if you do, are eating, it's not staying down. It's like your body is craving something, but you're not getting it. And it was really painful. And just going through that once was enough for me, where it's like, oh, I never want to be at that point again.

So, I mean, it's fun now and everything to joke about it, but I mean, I make jokes about it all the time to my family. Like, you know, if I had that button right now – but, you know, it's just – then again, you start thinking on the other side. It's like, yes, but once they take that button away, hello, there's two months that you're just going to be miserable, and it's not worth it.

DOEBELE: Now that you're back dating again, how does it feel? And how do you deal with dating without any legs?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: You can't really do, you know, dinner, movie and dancing anymore.

That's kind of out of the question. And, you know, long walks and stuff like that. You can kind of do it, but it's a little bit awkward and difficult.

But I mean, mostly, you've just got to find interests. I mean, luckily, some of the people I've dated had the same interests as me, like movies or politics or, you know, people we don't like on TV – kind of things like that, you know. You kind of share interests.

And then, I mean, it is difficult, because the typical date usually involves certain things, you know. And being Hispanic and being brought up to be a gentleman, it was kind of like, can't really go out there and open the door for her anymore, or I can't do this, you know, because I have to open the doors for my ramp to get out first. So, that becomes a little bit of an issue.

And, you know, that's – sometimes I get mad about that, and a little bit upset. But a lot of the people I've gone – a lot of the girls I've dated, they're kind of like – we kind of get it. You know, it'd be a little bit different. But I mean, just none of them were that serious.

I mean, it was a lot easier when you had legs, because you could do a lot more and be able to – are creative. But it's still the same thing. It's just finding that right personality, the right person you get along with.

And I just found out that I need to date people my age or older, because it's not the same when you date a little bit younger than you, and they're not mature. It really plays a factor with you.

DOEBELE: Have you had any concerns about your physical relationship (INAUDIBLE)?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: No. That hasn't been a problem. A little bit awkward, but not a problem. For the most part, it's just being creative, I guess you could say. But other than that, it's not a problem.

Maybe – my only main concern is I do want to have kids at one point.

DOEBELE: You do?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: I do. It's just, you know, finding out. You know, the doctors cleared me for everything, but you never know. There's that one chance.

But, I mean, hopefully, whoever I end up marrying and getting with, you know, if adoption becomes an option, or foster care, or something, you know, that can always be considered, too.

But I always got my family, you know, hands full with my family. And my brother and sister are like my kids half the time anyway. There is like – you know, the other day they called me and like, "Dad won't buy me this," or "Mom wants me to do this."

And it's like, "Then why are you calling me? I'm not your parent."

Or like, "We want you to take us to the mall shopping," or to the movies. And it's like, fine. I don't spend my money on me anyway. So, that becomes a thing, too.

So, I mean ...

DOEBELE: Your sister is how old?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: My ...

DOEBELE: ...two sisters.

MENDOZA VALENCIA: I have two sisters that I'm really close to. My sister, Marcella (ph), who is one year younger than me. She has the baby. And she's another one I spoil every once in a while.

And then, it's my brother Tino (ph), who is 18. And then my little sister, Maggie, who is actually 11. And probably she is a little bit more dependent on me half the time, because she'll call me up and stuff.

But, you know, it's kind of like, you know, I don't spend my money half the time on things that I probably should. But then it's like, oh, I don't really need that new game, or I don't need this. So it's like, oh, fine. I'll take you guys shopping or I'll take you to the mall.

DOEBELE: Now, Maggie was how old when you left for the military?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: Maggie was actually four-and-a-half at the time when I left.

DOEBELE: And old was she when you came back from Iraq?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: She was actually, I believe, seven or eight at the time. I think in between her birthday, because her birthday is three days after mine. So, it was seven or eight. It was around the timeframe right there.

DOEBELE: So, when you came home – well, actually, when did she see you for the first time?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: I believe she saw me the first time after I woke up, after ...

DOEBELE: At Walter Reed?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: At Walter Reed. I mean, I was in a coma for a while, so, you know, medically-induced coma that they brought me out of. And when I saw her, she was – you know, she was a little scared. But I think she was just more happy to see me than anything else.

And she was like my nurse half the time, too. So it was like, “Eat your pineapple.” And I want – “Eat it.”

And I’m like, “Fine,” you know.

So, I mean, it’s kind of weird, because we’re really, really close. And I think, out of all the things that happened now, kind of brought us closer as a family. And we’re just – it’s weird, because we won’t go a day without where we don’t text or call or leave a message or something with each other.

And it’s kind of funny, because it’s like, if I call home and no one’s there, I call someone’s cell phone. If nobody answers, then it’s like, OK, what’s going on?

Then it’s like, “Oh, we were in church. We forgot, we turned our phones off.”

I’m like, oh, OK. I understand that.

So, and things like that, you know. We’re just really close. And I mean, we kind of have the same interests as far as like what we like to do. And we like the same jokes, we like the same comedians, like the same shows. I mean, I like some shows they don’t like. They like some things I don’t liked.

So, I mean, there are differences, but, you know, just – it brought us really close as a family. And I think the biggest thing out of it is that we just play with each other more, as far as like – we like to pick on each other all the time. And I mean, I get picked on a lot, too, but I pick on them even harder, so they have to keep up.

So, I mean, if my sister and I get together, we’re always really going to team up against – it’s two against two, because, you know, they’re younger. My sister and I are closer in age. So we’re kind of like, you know, “Back in our day,” and “We didn’t have no cell phones,” or “We weren’t allowed to use calculators in class, and we got it done.” You know.

And we like to do that. And then, you know, they try to fight back. And it’s like, wait till another couple of years.

So, I mean, we’re really, really close. And that’s probably what is one of the best things that happened out of it. So, yes, the family is probably the best thing right now.

DOEBELE: Tell me about your mom.

MENDOZA VALENCIA: My mom is an angel with a devilish intent. And I say that because every once in a while, she’ll just do something kind of evil to get to me. And it’s like, “Mom! Why did you do that?”

And it’s just like, “What?”

And it's like, oh, that's right. Cultural thing. OK. Got to bring it back.

But you know, in my mind it's like sometimes I'm just wondering, did she really do that on purpose or not? And just say that, because, I mean, she was with me forever in the hospital. She was here with me when I first got here by myself forever.

I mean, I think the hardest thing was to like, for her, to leave me by myself for a week, then two weeks, then three weeks. And then like maybe not coming for a whole month, just because everything got crazy at home.

And it was just like, "I'm OK, Mom. I'm OK. It's fine."

That alone, and then just the fact that we're really close, I mean, we talk about everything. We tell each other a lot of stuff. And it's the same with all of us. I mean, we tell each other everything.

And it's funny, because my mom is sometimes the butt of our jokes. But then there's times where she'll just bring it back even harder, and get us. And we're like, "All right. I'm done. OK, Mom. You're the master." You know?

And I mean, even if it's in Spanish or in English, and then – I mean, our favorite joke to play on our mom is, my mom has this saying. She's like, "Why do I need to learn English? I have four kids who can translate for me. I have four translators."

And then, you know, when we catch her every once in a while on the phone or talking to a customer service, or something, we're like, "Oh, look at you. Yes, can I help you?"

Or like, "Look at you speaking English."

And she's like, "It's only when I need it."

DOEBELE: How old was she when you all – the whole family moved to the United States? Or around – was she a young woman?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: She had me when she was 18. And she was married at 16 in Mexico. And she was fairly young. And a lot of people say, "Is that your mom?"

"Yes, I know. She's young."

And it's just – you know, that's the way things happen down there. I mean ...

DOEBELE: So, she was only like 21 when she came to the United States.

MENDOZA VALENCIA: Yes. She was fairly, fairly young. I mean, my step dad is at least 10 years older than her. And I mean, he's a little bit more mature than a lot of us. You know, that's dad. You know, we can play around with him, you know, sometimes. But it's Dad, you know. Don't get him mad.

But, no, my mom's kind of like – she gets into the same things we do half the time. And it's really interesting, because she's very young, but she's very willing to learn a lot of stuff, too. So, I mean, there's things that we learned, and then it was kind of we taught it to her. And then she's like, "Really?"

It's like, "Yes, Mom."

It's like, "Well, I'm going to go buy the book and read that.

And then go find – and I don't know how she finds it. She'll find it in Spanish, and then start reading it. And like, "Did you know this?"

I'm like, "Wait. Let me get my edition out, because I don't remember that."

And it's just really interesting, because, I mean, she's like our best friend half the times, and then it's just like, "Mom, leave us alone."

DOEBELE: Why didn't she – why hasn't she learned English better ...

MENDOZA VALENCIA: I mean, she knows enough to get her by. And I bet she knows more than she's letting on, to be frankly honest.

But it's just the fact that everywhere she goes, there's always someone that speaks Spanish, especially here in California.

Even my uncle just recently remarried, and an American and, you know, blue – blond hair, blue eyes and everything. And I have the beautiful niece, cousin, Miranda, Michelle (ph) and it's my Aunt Laura (ph), but she's blond. And she's kind of, you know, a little bit American, you know. And it's just, you know, it's like – you know, she kind of – my mom kind of wanted (ph) (INAUDIBLE) her to learn Spanish, so they could talk.

And it worked out. I mean, my mom's very strong willed and very, you know, independent and very, you know, a strong Mexican woman. And it's kind of like, "well, if it's not going to work out my way, I'll make it work out my way," kind of, you know, attitude, which I guess has rubbed off on us.

Because, I mean, there's a lot of times where, even in the office, you know, it's like my mom saying, "Yes, you can." That was her favorite saying to say. She still says it to this day. And it's like, OK. My backpack's full. I've got files. All right. I'm putting them in my mouth while I'm rolling out, so, you know, I have a folder in my mouth. And I'm rolling down the hallway, like, I'm late for a meeting. Just get out of the way.

And that's just the kind of mom that she's always been. And my dad's just been kind of the other extreme – serious and, you know, really to the point. And it's like, you know, hardworking, and it's like you've always got to work for what you want.

And that's what I think my parents instilled in all of us. And that's kind of like, I think, why I've been able to avoid a lot of the other downfalls that some of my, you know, retired vets and some of my friends have gone into. And it's like, you know, parenting does help a lot.

And it's just that my mom is amazing. I mean, she drives two-and-a-half hours every other week, just to come down here and visit for a couple of days, and see if I need anything. Or like, your laundry's getting too high up. I'll do it. Don't worry about it. It's like, OK. Let me iron your clothes.

And I'm like – she's a neat freak half the time, too. So it's like, "Mom, I just dusted."

"Well, you didn't dust well enough." So, stuff like that.

But I mean, it's just everything has brought us closer together.

DOEBELE: You mentioned in our 2005 interview that you had some concerns of whether you'd be able to go back to Mexico without legs and in your current state at that time.

What happened? What's happened?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: Well, my grandma passed away back in February. And we kind of knew she was sick. It was cancer, and she'd been sick for a while. It was just getting progressively worse.

And I pretty much just told me mom, I really want to go see her. I really feel the need. I need to go see her, because she made the effort to go see me at Walter Reed while I was there.

And we said, fine, we'll arrange it. We worked it out, and I was very, very surprised how things have changed down there, as far as for handicaps.

I mean, everywhere I looked I'm like, I don't remember there being these many ramps or easy accesses as everybody else. And it was like, they've improved a lot. They still have a long ways to go. I mean, it's nowhere close to, you know, here in California, or the United States.

But I mean they're getting better. I mean, and a lot of it has to do with a lot more elderly people being in wheelchairs there, too. But, I mean, my family down there was so accommodating. They were willing to help me out.

They were actually surprised at how un-babied I had to be. And a lot of times it was like, "No, great Uncle Jack. I can do it myself," you know or like, you know, "Uncle Jose, I'm fine. No, I'm OK. You know, it's fine. I'll be OK."

So, I mean, a lot of that stuff happened, too. But there were limitations, too. I mean, some relatives' houses I couldn't visit, because it was just like impossible to get in, and it was just like, I appreciate the thought. It was just – you know, I came here to see my grandma. And there's no way I can get into your house, so, why don't you just bring it over here, and we'll eat here?

And it was very, very satisfying. I mean, I felt very happy to go home and see all my relatives and go to all the different hometowns I used to visit and everything.

And some times were better than others. I mean, the big thing that I really enjoyed was I actually got to go see the cathedral that, you know, has been in the building in my grandma's town forever. And it was turning out really beautiful, and I got to see it. I got to go everywhere. And I'm like, wow. There's like – there's almost no steps anywhere.

So, that was another thing, too. And it was just really surprising. And a lot of people were really understanding of the situation.

I mean, there are a lot of times that, you know, you don't know how people are going to react. And especially to me it was like, yes, I was born in Mexico, and now I'm an American citizen, and I fought in a war.

How are they going to take that? You know, are they are going to say I abandoned one culture for another? And, you know, a lot of them know, are understanding. And they're like, you know, you started hearing stories about, oh, well, my great-grandfather fought in like the 10th Mexican civil war. And he lost a leg. And here and there.

And so, you're like, you know, it kind of opened up a lot of stuff, too. So, I mean, a lot of my fears were taken away, but then a lot of them were still there.

It's still a pain in the ass to fly in a plane. I mean, so that's always a big thing for me, too.

But, you know, nothing a good shot of that vidacain (ph) can't cure before you go on a plane. But that's the other thing, too, is like plans to go into other countries have always been kind of an iffy issue, too.

But, you know, if we can in Mexico, we can anywhere.

DOEBELE: When we talked in 2005, you could not remember hardly anything, not only from the day that you were blown up but from a lot of the time afterwards and some of the time before. Has any of that come back to you?

MANNY VALENCIA MENDOZA VALENCIA: Bits and pieces have come back. My conversation with my sister from the night before. But that's because of her assistance and we've talked about it and you know it's jogged the memory a little bit. I still don't remember anything leading up to or the day of the blast or a couple days later.

I mean, some people have told me, “You woke on up and you were coherent for a little bit.” But then it’s kind of like I still don’t remember it. You know, and to be frank, honest, you know I’m one of those people I don’t like to say I don’t want to remember it or I don’t want to know. But that’s kind of one those things where I’m like, “You know, if God said this is something I don’t need to remember then I probably don’t need to remember it so I shouldn’t push it.”

If it comes, it comes. You know? My actually worst fear about it is you know I’m doing something and all of a sudden it just comes back. You know? You have like a flash or something, you know?

And that’s kind of like one of my fears about it is, but it just gives – I remember the pain a little but I don’t want to remember it the way you kind of remember it the way that you know you hear about it. You know, luckily I don’t have too much as a bad memory of it to actually trigger it, but I know it would be pretty bad if I did.

And you know I kind of think I’ve dreamt about it maybe and just don’t want to acknowledge it or something, subconsciously. But you know you kind of get those feelings where you’re just like, “Oh, where did I get that, a rush of emotion real quick?” You know, but then I just let it go because I know it’s not healthy for me and it’s not something I should probably be doing too much.

And you know like I don’t need a therapist yet. But all the therapists at Walter Reed were kind of like, “You know, if you don’t remember it, don’t push it. It’ll come if it comes. If it doesn’t then you know it doesn’t.” And the mind’s tricky that way.

I mean, for some reason I just can’t remember those – that one section of time but I can remember stuff I did as a five year old. I can remember stuff I’ve done two days ago. You know, and it’s kind of like but why can I remember that? And it’s just – I’ve got to let it go, so I do. I really don’t dwell on it too much.

And luckily I don’t have those nightmares or night terrors or stuff like that, so. I’ve been pretty fortunate. I can say that.

DOEBELE: Some veterans in your – similar to your situation have told us that the loud noises, fireworks, all that kind of stuff, really bothers them. Does any of it bother you?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: Not really. The thing that bothers me the most is maybe going to the movie theaters and getting a couple – like motion sickness if something is going too fast or you know it’s slightly a little bit out of my peripheral vision, it will start affecting me like maybe that’s kind of a trigger for it.

But for the most part I can deal with you know explosions and fireworks and loud noises. Not too much associated with that. I mean, the only thing that honestly, to one point, that it really got to me was watching an episode – and I think it was House. And one of the patients had to get an emergency tracheotomy and I was like – I was watching it and especially (ph) for having one and getting it taken out and fixed and everything. It really like pushed me over the edge. And it was like – I had to like really just step away for a while. And then I’m just like, “OK, calm down. Calm down.”

And I just sat there like block it out completely because it – I mean, that personally was something that affected me more. And I think for me it was because I can remember feeling the pain and everything that went with having the trach and how much I didn’t want to have it. And it just brought me back to that place where I felt like I wasn’t in control.

And I know I’m never 100 percent in control but you know that whole illusion that you have some – a lot of control is comforting. And at that moment I kind of felt like, “OK, I lost it.” And it was just – it wasn’t like a good moment for me. But now it isn’t so bad and I kind of know which one – when to kind of avoid it.

So I really don’t watch too many hospital dramas about – I’m addicted to Grey’s. I always said that, “Where were my hot doctors when I needed them at the hospital?” You know? They seem to be getting – having fun and I’m like, “Where were they?”

DOEBELE: Do you – do you keep in touch with any of the guys who were with you that day?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: I try to. E-mail is a little bit harsh – hard just because you know work takes a lot of priority. And it's just – you know I'm grateful that I have a job there but it keeps me occupied.

But it's – really the one that I talk to mostly is Captain Barker. And at the time he was Lieutenant Barker.

DOEBELE: Yes. He was your rear commander?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: Rear commander. And my mods (ph) was taking – she's a scene (ph), and nobody in my command (ph) knows anything bad about him. He did so much for me and do so much to take care of me and to look out for me and so much you know that was way above you know what anybody could do to help us out and to get everything squared away. And, I mean, he would always talk to my mom even though he knew she could understand but she probably couldn't answer 100 percent, to some things. He always talked to my sister and my dad. I mean, was really like always calling me every other day to see how I was doing.

We still e-mail each other quite a bit. We talk to each other quite a bit. We're always sending pictures you know like, "Hey, this is me in my and wife at this (ph)," and I'm like, "Oh, hey this is me and the kids at this place." You know, so it's – we stay quite a bit in touch. And lately it's been a little bit harder with you know work and my promotion and everything.

So – but I'm the – he's probably the one I stay in the most contact to and do want to talk to the most.

DOEBELE: Do you have any group of people at the VA that you hang out with or have any kind of communication with?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: Not really. Mostly the ones that I do talk to are like my social workers for like Wounded Warrior and...

DOEBELE: What is Wounded Warrior?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: ...Wounded Warrior is like – it used to be called G3, which is the part of the Army that took care of you know injured vets and you know people that needed to be transitioned out because of their injuries and stuff.

And they're really a great organization now. They're called the Wounded Warrior program and they help out and they try to do counseling. And if you can't get some kind of medical treatment or an answer to a question, they try to look for it and – I mean, it's kind of like having a caseworker. And my caseworker actually just had a kid so she's out of the – out of the loop for a while and I have another one. But you know I can't wait until she gets back, if she comes back.

And mostly most of the vets that I talk to are the Sentinels because Sentinels are a lot of retired veterans in the group. And they work a lot with you know the VFW, the American Legion and you know all the different – you know, the Army Marine Corps and everything.

So usually if I'm hanging out with a group of people like that it's at the bar or at a group gathering at a you know veteran center with them. You know? I mean, it's always amazing, too, because you start telling war stories and it's all like you know they don't have as bad as the situation that happened to me, but a lot of them have these great war stories. And they start telling them you're like, "I think I know who you're talking about. She's still there in Korea." Things like that.

You know, so it's pretty cool.

DOEBELE: You served in Korea, correct?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: I served in Korea for a year. And a lot of vets you know some of them were in the Korean War or some of them were stationed in Korea. And they can remember certain things and certain places that just never changed. And it was just like, "Yes."

You know, so I mean, a lot of the times I spend more time with them. Like as far as to get with Army people and stuff like that, yes, I spend with the veterans.

DOEBELE: Are you harassed to speak at any organizations or speak to people – to veterans or non-veterans about your experiences?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: They actually asked me a year ago to speak at the Martinez Viez (ph) ceremony, the SW (ph) ceremony. And I said yes but then some things came up where I was not going to be able to attend because I had to go to a symposium for work and I couldn't miss it. Well, I was encouraged not to miss it.

So I had to cancel it. But other than that, no. I mean, if you ask most of my friends and my family, I don't like the spotlight a lot. It just so happens I get put into it quite a bit. And you know I'm fairly easy going and to me it's like, "Sure. I'll do it." You know? "OK." And it doesn't take much for me to say yes. You know, a lot of times it's more like, "OK, I've got to do it, got to do it."

And then a lot of times it's my mom saying, "No, you've got to do it. You need to do it." It's, "Yes, ma'am. I'll do it." But...

DOEBELE: Did she have to do that for this interview?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: No. Actually I told her about it and she's like – you know, she's like – I told her, "Yes, I'm doing it, Mom. I'm doing it." And she's like, "OK, as long as we're clear."

But for the most part, though, not too many. Most of it – the time is just people asking me questions. I don't mind it when people ask questions at all.

DOEBELE: Is there any question that you really wish they wouldn't ask or – but they always do?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: No. It's more like my personal pet peeve is – kids are very amazing. I love kids to death (ph), and my niece is a great example. Just the other day she was like – you know, she likes to dance. So she was dancing and I'm like you know – dancing out there and she's like, "No. You come down here to the floor." And I'm like, "Maggie (ph), I can't do that." And she's like, "No, you come down on the floor."

So you know – so I did, and I got down on the ground with her and then she was like, "Well, something is not right here." So she didn't grasp it 100 percent. So she just patted my seat to get back on my seat so I did. And then you know we were like nothing.

And I think she – at that point she kind of understood that Uncle Manny's a little bit different. Kids are not scared to ask questions, which I love. I mean, going to Target or like anywhere, kids asking me is great.

It's the parents that can be a problem because they like start, "Oh, no. Don't bother," or "No, no. Don't get close." It's kind of like, "Lady, I'm sure I'm not contagious," or nothing. It's kind of like this happened to me. It wasn't something you know medical or anything like you know it wasn't like a disease or anything like that but it just happened. You know, it's like who's to say you're not going to get in a car accident and lose an arm or something.

So it's – you know, that kind of to me is annoying. A lot of my friends – or especially Maggie (ph), will get mad when people gawk. You know, you don't see someone in a wheelchair that doesn't have both legs all the time. I mean, so it's kind of like you know she gets mad about that. She's like, "Look at them. They're staring at you. I'm going to go beat them up." And I'm like, "Maggie (ph), no. Stop. Calm down." You know? "Chill out. They're just curious. You know, if they want to ask a question, let them."

You know, and I think some people are more sensitive towards that whereas I let it go but yet to me my pet peeve is just when people try to act like I'm contagious or something. It's like, "Lady, you might know somebody else who might be in a situation," so you never know.

But that's my only concern. I'm – I am more than willing to answer people's questions because I feel the more you know, the better you're off. And you know people ask me at work that I run into. I'm in such a big office that you might not see people every day. I mean, so you know sometimes I run into people and then they ask you a question or like they're just curious. And it's like, "Yes." And I'm willing to answer it. It's not a big deal for me.

DOEBELE: Where are your prosthetics?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: They're in my closet being charged right now. Are they amazing pieces of machinery? Yes. Do I like using them? Yes and no. Since I lost most of my leg at my hip, it's – the bucket is on my right leg. It's – the hip bucket is very uncomfortable. And you know, God knows if they'll perfect it but it's just I don't like it. It makes it very uncomfortable.

I can deal with the other leg but like I said, you know there is – like if I had a knee or a little bit more, it'd make up tons of difference as far as me walking or standing more. But in a practical sense point, I get around pretty well in my wheelchair and it just makes it easier to be – you know, I have a desk job. It's not exactly the crat (ph) work I used to do in the Army as an engineer but you know I still work you know 40 hours a week. And it's done mostly (ph) but you know I'd rather be comfortable and somewhat mobile and you know I've gotten pretty good at moving around my desk.

So it's kind of like it works for me whereas you know why am I (INAUDIBLE) and being esthetically pleasing to everybody else. They just make me uncomfortable and then I'd be miserable. And you know that's probably not the best place for me to be at.

So I was kind of like – you know, I use them at P/T.

DOEBELE: Oh, your physical therapy.

MENDOZA VALENCIA: Physical therapy. I'll work out and still stay in shape in case something comes along that's better. I'm OK to use it, but from a practical standpoint, it's not good for me. You know, it might be better for someone else. And by all means, please, if it's better for someone else, please use them.

But I'm saying for me personally it's more of a hindrance in getting around and just being comfortable all day whereas you know if I wear them and I actually walk in them and everything all day, it's – I'm going to use up more of my energy so I'm going to be tired more often.

And that's not a good thing when you have to answer the phone or you know you're getting e-mails and you know quick instant messages of you know testers out in the field wanting some information. And I'd be like, "OK. (INAUDIBLE) for you. OK. Found it." Whereas you know if I was on my legs all day and I started getting tired, I might fall asleep right on my desk you know.

So – but that's another thing, too, you know. It takes twice the amount of energy just to walk with prosthetics that it's – you get tired easier.

DOEBELE: Was there a moment of clarity about that, a moment in which you said, "Yes, this is it. I'm happier in the wheelchair than I am on prosthetic legs."

MENDOZA VALENCIA: I would love to be on prosthetic legs that were practical, that would work and would be comfortable. The problem is it takes 25 minutes to get in that bucket seat. I mean, I've timed it and roughly 25 minutes is like my best time. And it's just because of all the things you have to get ready for it and the way it works and everything.

Now, if you have to use the bathroom after that, it's a very bad thing because you know it's fairly uncomfortable to get out of it and you know it's just not very practical. I mean, it was great engineering and everything in how they came up with it, but it's not exactly – how do you say – like field tested 100 percent. So it doesn't work out for me.

For my – this leg, if I could find a way where I could keep my balance all the time on it and be standing all the time then yes, I'd be great. I could finally – you know, the running joke in some of my friends is like, "Well, look me in the eye." "Oh, that's right. You can't." So I'm like (INAUDIBLE).

So I mean, it's stuff like that. You know, but for me it's just – I'd love to be using them all the time but just from a practical point, I do get around a lot better. And I think I came to the realization after a couple months of being back home in California and just like, "I'm wasting way too much time getting in these things and going to work and then being uncomfortable," because I'm sitting down most of that time. And then it's just like I can be esthetically pleasing to everybody else or I can be comfortable.

And it's kind of like at some point you've got to kind of let that vanity thing go and just say, "I've got to be practical." That's kind of like where I made my choice. And, I mean, I've seen some of the things that are coming out and some of the prosthetics and stuff. And it's really amazing, but it's still my main point when I look at that stuff is like, "OK, where's the practical sense on this? Where is it? What is the catch?"

You know, because there always is one. You know, and so they've learned to either grow back lens (ph) or attach something somehow. It's not going to be 100 percent OK yet. So I've got to see, you know.

But I'm hopeful. You know, we're advancing with technology so much you just never know.

DOEBELE: What – I presume you're 100 percent disabled?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: Yes.

DOEBELE: To be classified.

MENDOZA VALENCIA: Yes, 100 percent by the VA and by the State of California and the federal government and everything. I am 100 percent disabled.

DOEBELE: Did you have any problem in your transition from Walter Reed to the VA?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: Not really because the Sentinels were – they were pushing it so hard and they knew so many people in the right places. And I could be wrong and you could ask the other recipients, but it just seemed to me it was as quick as it could be and it was probably quicker than it should have been. You know?

I mean, my official retirement wasn't until like December of that year, of 2005, but had already been – I hadn't been in the Army really for about a couple months. I was already in another job. I was already doing this.

So, I mean, officially I was still part of the Army but I was working somewhere else and having my life. And I mean, they pushed a lot of things to get through so I could get out – go out quicker. And I do know that they made it a little bit better for a lot of other transitions.

But, you know, I have heard, though, bad stories about transitions. And it's really sad. And, I mean, that's something that really needs to be looked at and fixed. And that is something...

DOEBELE: Do you think it was the extent of your injuries that made it easier just to say, "Yes, she's 100 percent disabled."

MENDOZA VALENCIA: Yes, I think so because I mean, a lot of people are not – you know, you say disability and you look at people and – I mean, I do it all the time, too. And it's because it's something I've seen. It's just – you know, when people park in handicap spots and they have the placard or the plates and you're just like – just because you can't see it doesn't mean it's there – it's not there. But then it's like – but what if it's not.

You know, there's always that doubt whereas with me it's kind of like it's out in the open. You can see it. It's not like I'm hiding. It's not like they're going to grow back overnight. You know, so it's kind of like it's pretty much you see it.

So I mean I think that's kind of the deal, too, with it also. But then again, my injuries are physical and my personal thing is sometimes mental injuries are way severe more harsh than anything else.

DOEBELE: What do you think when you hear the stories and (INAUDIBLE) and the controversies over whether the VA is approving enough – enough veterans who are requesting help because of PTSD?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: I really want to take the benefit of the doubt on that for the VA just because you never know who's trying to you know pull something you know or get out of something you know. I mean, my belief is that you know the VA is trying the best they can with what they've got.

And should Congress give them more money or more help or more resources? Yes, they should. I mean, they still haven't fixed the problems from the other wars with veterans. And that's something that we're still living to this day. I mean, you hear the horror stories from other veterans, you know, especially veterans here in the community that I know you hear the horror stories.

Is it going to be that bad for us you know for my generation? That's – maybe, maybe not. You don't know. And that's something that's frustrating, too. You know, I'm very fortunate where I don't need to depend on the VA for everything. But then there are some people who do.

And the VA is their lifeline for a lot of things. And if it's really bad in some places, how can it be so good in other places? You know, I mean, Martiz (ph) is an amazing VA center. I mean, I couldn't ask for a better VA center. When I had to have surgery, I was in there within three months, they did it, and I was out, and that was good. And it's kind of like you hear other people where it's taking like a month or years for them to get in there and do it. And you're just like, "Why is that happening?"

You know, I mean, you just kind of hear all these horror stories and you're kind of like, you know, there really should be something done and there really should be something that should be looked at that I don't think enough people have called foul play yet for it to happen. We're kind of like a society where you say, "If you don't see it, it doesn't exist." You know, until enough people see it happen and enough people are affected by it, then there's something going to be done about it.

I mean, take gaps (ph) for an example. Enough people were finally saying, "What's going on? What's going on?" that now you're hearing, well, Congress is starting an investigation. I mean, it's pretty slow, but you've got to get enough people involved in on it and you've got to get enough people to look into the issue, I think. My experience is nothing been but very good or great with them that I can't say I've seen the bad.

DOEBELE: Walk through with me what your – the benefits that you get today because of A, being in the military, B, being a veteran, and three, being a disabled veteran. What do you get on a monthly basis?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: I get pension. It's not really a pension but it's a compensation. It's – I'm 100 percent disabled by the VA. They qualified me. So they send me a monthly check from the U.S. Treasury Department.

DOEBELE: Tax-free.

MENDOZA VALENCIA: Tax-free. Actually that just became tax-free this year where it became retroactive. So my last couple years of taxes that I did pay on it, I get that back. So I have to re-file my taxes probably next year when I take them on back and say, "Hey, here's the letter. They said this."

So – and then that's free (ph). You know, so that – so they send me a monthly check and they pretty much medical and all that stuff gets (INAUDIBLE).

DOEBELE: All medical.

MENDOZA VALENCIA: All medical, dental, they give you benefits for like school and stuff like that.

DOEBELE: Are you going to – are you going back to school now or are you going to go back?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: I'm going to go back. I really am trying to go back. It's just if my (INAUDIBLE) gets lower, I can probably do it. It's just I don't want to – I probably said too much (INAUDIBLE) but it's made it hard for me to go back. But I definitely want to go back. I'm – that is one of the main reasons why I joined the military was I needed college money.

DOEBELE: If your van blew up tomorrow, would the government help you at all?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: Yes. They would. I'm sure there's plenty of grants and stuff out there. You've just got to know to look for them. And if one thing it's taught me is don't be scared to ask. You know, it's – the American Legion, VFW, the Red Cross, everybody, you can ask, all these organizations. And if they don't know the answer, they'll get back to you and let you know.

And it's like you can always ask. And there's nothing wrong with asking. I think the best thing you can – you can argue against is a dumb question is a question not asked. And that's true. I mean, if you don't know then ask. And I mean, there's plenty of places that you can look stuff up on the Internet.

I mean, I'm sure if you say enough to news media and places like that, somebody's going to do something. And I mean, I'm not one to ask for a handout. It's just you know for a helping hand would be great, you know?

DOEBELE: Do you ever feel like you get more than you should?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: No. I mean, I get away with a lot more stuff than (INAUDIBLE).

DOEBELE: But I mean, from the federal government. Do you ever think that you get more from them financially, monetarily, grant-wise, than you should?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: No, because, you know, that is something they're compensating me for because being the (INAUDIBLE), I mean, I could be wrong but I remember this very well because they explained it to me is that part of the reason why they're doing everything they're doing is because, A, they take you out of your home, your safe place, and they trained you. You signed a contract and everything. But they put you in harm's way. They become responsible the minute that they put you in harm's way.

And that is their justification for putting you in harm's way. So do I feel like I'm taking advantage of it? No because they're the ones that put me in harm's way. I said, "Yes, I'll join and I'll fight for my country."

Did I want to go to Iraq? No, I didn't. Did I go? Yes because I was ordered to and yes because it was the right thing to do. You know, I was told the orders and that's what I did. I could have done what some other people at the time did and refuse to go. Where did they end up? They ended up in prison or kicked out of the Army without any benefits. And for me that wasn't an option. I mean, I was always taught by my parents you promise something, you say you're going to do something, you're going to do it.

And I promised and I said, "I volunteered to join up." So do I think that I'm reaping something more than I should? No. I mean, if you look at it that way, no. If you're looking at it that you know any other way then I think you need to re-look at it and actually think, "Then why do you have to say you're getting something you don't deserve?"

You know, I mean, everything I was taught in the Army is like even when you get out, the military's got to give you a plane ticket to the nearest place to your house. Well, this is the nearest to my house I wanted to be. And I can't exactly walk home so yes, what I deserve is what I got.

You know, so that is something that I am compensated for for you know pretty much having to change my life. You know?

DOEBELE: You know, one of the things that you told me in 2005 was that you felt that the vehicle that you were in the day that you were injured was really not meant to take the extensive covering of damage that it was taking from incoming fire.

Do you look back on that at all, that why did this happen, why was I put in this harm's way that you just talked about?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: I do. And, I mean, I always wanted to say – and vulnerability would have been great at that point or you know Superman would have been great. But it is – put it this way. I'm not very, very religious but I am – I was brought up Catholic and I do believe you know there is some spiritual power.

My belief is God does not do anything that you cannot overcome. He does not set limitations on you that you cannot either become stronger, get smarter, or overcome. And I honestly believe that he did this for me not because he was punishing me but there was something I needed to learn and something I needed to do. And maybe it was meant for me because it wasn't meant for someone else. Maybe someone else couldn't have done it or couldn't have dealt with it.

I mean, I even surprise myself sometimes when I think back on it. I'm like, "I have really gone through some bad stuff and I'm pretty OK." You know, not 100 percent physically but up here and here I'm pretty good. And that is something that I don't think everybody can say. And that's you know something I truly believe in is that you know there's a reason for everything and we might not understand it, we might not know what it is, but eventually we will find out what it is. And it's my – my goal is to do the best that I can with what I've got.

So that's kind of like my answer for it.

DOEBELE: So do you know yet what your higher power, your whatever, wanted you to learn from your experience? Have you found that answer yet?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: I don't know. You know, because sometimes I think I do and then sometimes I don't because, you know, every once in a while I'm like, "OK, I'm pretty good you know getting my stuff done and everything." And then there are times like, "Why didn't I do this two days ago when I had the chance?"

You know, there always are there moments where you're kind of questioning yourself. And I think for me the reason it happened was – my mom says and my family says it was probably because you needed to teach something to everybody that you know or something that we needed to know. And it's just you were the only strong one who could take it.

But then again, it's like I think at one point in my life I didn't appreciate my family as much as I should have or as much as I knew that they were there because, I mean, there are not a lot of families like my family out there that are you know mom and dad talk to the kids, everything's OK, open for discussion.

And then you know I really do believe that that was to bring us closer together because we're (INAUDIBLE) you know we weren't really a family. I mean, nothing really bad it's just we weren't really talking, we weren't communicating. We just – you know, I pretty much up and left.

I mean, there's no other way to say it. I pretty much told mom and dad, "You know, mom, I got money for college and by the way, I'm joining the Army." That's how I got it. You know, and after a while they were OK with it. You know, they were really proud about it. But you know I think I just – they were really splintered as a family and we just had to come together. And I think that's one of the reasons.

And then I think the other reason was that everything that's happened since then has been amazing for me. I mean, I don't even know if that hadn't have happened if I would have had my niece or any family relatives I have now. I mean, I have 13 other cousins and nephews because ever since that happened to now.

I wouldn't change that for anything. You know, I love my family. And you know to say back, I would go back and change things, I would like to say I would but I can't say that I would because I don't want to lose any of my family members that I have now.

You know, and granted, you know, we always have that whole packed in future (ph) change of everything all of a sudden going out of whack. I don't think I could deal with that. You know, it's my family's probably the most important thing to me than my friends and then it's like work, career and everything else after that.

And to me I think that's just – everything that happened made that more clear to me.

DOEBELE: You told me in March 2005 that you really, really, really wanted to be a crime scene investigator.

MENDOZA VALENCIA: Yes, I did. And I just told you that I'd just be a lab tech. I mean, realistically speaking I've gone back and looked at it realistically. Yes, I can do that. And actually a friend at work, she actually went into the whole schooling and everything and said, "Yes, I can do it. I'm qualified. I've got my certificate and everything but I can't handle the blood."

I'm like, "Oh, that's great. You did all that, you paid for it and now you can't handle the blood?" It's like, I have no problem with it but you know it's – yes, maybe something further down as a second career or third career. You know, I think my time at the phone company is going to be for so long and then it's going to be time to move on to something else.

Like I honestly thought the military was going to be my 20 years, the first 20 years of something. And you know at first I joined for the money and then it was like I really kind of like this. I really enjoy the structure. I really enjoy the discipline. I enjoyed traveling around the world and getting to do stuff.

And you know the telephone company is kind of the same way. I get to work with a lot of people, get to do a lot of different things. But after 20, 25 years it might be something to change you know and go back to school hopefully in between there and get a couple other careers or certificates or degrees in something else, you know?

You know, I'm always looking at Maggie (ph) and saying, "Well, what do you want to be?" "Well, I want to be a psychiatrist." But then you know she changes her mind. "I want to be a ballerina. I want to be a dancer. I want to be on the show, "So You Think You Can Dance."

You know, stuff like that you know is always kind of like, "What are you talking about?" You know, it's like you know that kind of has also put me in the position where like you know I really shouldn't single me out. And that's one of those things I've really looked forward to.

And if I do what I've been doing, that's great. But I think my interest has led more from crime scene investigation to the technology aspect of it, which is something that I've just found my love for again because I always loved to work on computers. I always loved working with electronics. And now working on the telephone side of tel you know the telecommunication end, it's like, we can do anything with cell phones nowadays.

So it's kind of like you know I really – my love for technology is that much more increased. You know, do I love everything we have? No. I think – do I think this is moving in the right direction? Yes, I think it is.

You know, eventually that whole you know Star Trek, one little guy (ph) who does everything will be great. That (INAUDIBLE).

DOEBELE: If somebody walked into your apartment, two photos they would see very prominently displayed in your living room, one is a photo of you still in your hospital bed at Walter Reed with President Bush, Mrs. Bush, your mother, and there's somebody else in there.

MENDOZA VALENCIA: Yes. It was my therapist.

DOEBELE: Your therapist?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: I mean, I asked him to do it because at the time I was slightly not myself, to say the least. And it was like, "OK, my mom's going to keep in check for some stuff but I need you to keep me in check for the military stuff." I mean, I...

DOEBELE: Were you afraid you would say something to him?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: I was afraid I might say something and I just didn't want it to happen because you know whatever I was feeling at the time and whatever I feel now are almost two different things.

But I just wanted to – I need you to keep my military bearing. I'm still a soldier even though I'm hurt. And I might not like him, but he's still my commander in chief. You know, so that was kind of the reason why I asked him that.

But I really did like my therapist and I really got along with him and I valued his opinion a lot. So for me that was a lot – very big thing for me to have him there. And you know it was – in my mind it was like, "This is the commander in chief. Yes, he had a reason for sending us there. And you know what happened, happened. But I'm still a soldier, I'm still a sergeant, and I still need to follow my (INAUDIBLE)."

So that was kind of my main reason for asking him to be there. And I just wanted you know another dude in there. It was kind of like I don't want myself to be with Bush all by myself. So I wanted something in there to be a buffer. So that was my main reason for that.

DOEBELE: Tammy Depra (ph) told us that she refused to allow Secretary Rumsfeld to come see her. Would you have done that?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: I did do that for someone else.

DOEBELE: Who did you do that for?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: Mike Tyson. I did not really...

DOEBELE: Why?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: ...I didn't feel the need to meet him. You know, for me personally at the time I believed he was going through that nasty divorce and there was all this publicity stuff behind it. And I felt that he didn't – if he did want to be there it was for other reasons than some of the other reasons that the other celebrities and people that have been there.

I mean, I'm not a big country fan, but meeting Wynona Judd, that was amazing to me because I had just gone back to the hospital for my colostomy reversal and she came in and she spent an hour and a half with me and my mom. And to me that was like, "Oh my God. You're (INAUDIBLE) the person in TV rings (ph)," you know, and it was like, "You're really a nice person." And that to me was like – meant more to me that meeting someone who was there for publicity.

And she really like was there for a (INAUDIBLE). You could tell she really meant it. You could tell – you can tell when people are there sincerely unless they're amazing actors and they've won an Oscar or something because every person I met there that was there has been amazing.

Secretary Rumsfeld, I didn't feel a need that I did want to see him because I didn't want to see him. He was not a bad person in my mind. He was someone that was following the commander in chief like we all were. And you know whatever Tammy's reasons were were her reasons but they're not my reasons.

I – personally do I think he's a great man or anything like that? No, but you know I kind of wanted to meet my secretary of defense at the time. You know, that was to me was the honor was the title, you know. And it was like, you know, here I was you know a couple years ago a sergeant, never met anybody and now I'm meeting you know

generals and sergeant majors and you know brigadier commanders of everything. You know, and the secretary this, secretary that, it's kind of like when in your life are you ever going to have this opportunity again?

So there weren't many reasons for me to turn down anybody you know except you know, that was one instance where I had seen him before and I kind of – but he's not being sincere. And that to me was personally offensive and I didn't feel that he needed the reason for him to get a quick photo in.

DOEBELE: So back to President Bush. Did you say anything you shouldn't have said?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: No. And honestly I think now that I think about it, and even thinking about it before, I don't think I would have said anything. But you know I was very heavily medicated and I wasn't feeling well that day. But you never know you know. All of a sudden tracks (ph) might kick in or something.

But I just wanted to be sure. But I don't think I would have. And I think my parents installed enough discipline and the military did to do that. But you know that moment where you lose complete control, you never know if it's then. And I just wanted to – you know, someone to be there and just to make sure. But...

DOEBELE: How do you – tell me how your feelings about the Iraq War, let's say, the day that you knew that you were going to go to Iraq, how do you feel about the war differently then than you feel about it today?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: I don't think I feel much differently.

DOEBELE: And what is that feeling?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: Not understanding it 100 percent. You know, I look at it a lot – I honest to God look a lot of things still from a military point of view. It's something you can't really shut off. And I don't think I would want to shut it off.

But you know, for me when I first you know found out that I was going, I was kind of wondering, "Well, yes, we kind of needed to get dictator." And at the time still we have to find these massive weapons of mass destruction that are buried all over the country and stuff like that.

You know, that was kind of my thing is like, "If we haven't found them now, we probably won't find them, if they were even there." And then my other thing was you know we're going into help people in need. Yes, they didn't ask for our help but they kind of did.

You know, and it was kind of like, "Should we have waited for more help personally from the world to go in?" Yes. We should have. Did that happen? No. Are kind of in the consequence of it now? Yes.

You know, do I feel that the media and everything else is doing it justice? No. I don't feel like the country realizes we're at war. When, you know, the war makes only a 10 second news flat (ph) at the 10:00 news, that's not right.

You always hear all these stories in like you know during Vietnam and during you know World War II about the news pretty much covering everything. And you're like, "Why aren't they doing that?"

And the other thing that annoys me, too, about that is people don't know. And that's what gets really upsetting about it is because when I was there and we were fighting and we were doing everything, the Iraqi people were helping us. They were amazing. They would do everything to help us.

And you know even the kids, they were – you've never seen happier kids in your life. I mean, they saw the uniform and it was something like they saw like, "Yes, we can do something," you know? And the media doesn't portray it like that. The media thinks it's like everybody in Iraq is out to get us and it's not true. It's kind of the other way around.

I mean, everybody that we captured in my unit that when we captured and we did something, if they were Iraqi nationals, they were being forced. They were threatened. Their families were being held hostage. They were threatened because they were going to get killed.

And the – it was – they weren't the ones doing half the problem. Half the problem was you know radical groups from other countries coming in and doing other (INAUDIBLE).

So to me that's the other thing that annoys me. And it's like I always tell that to people. It's like Iraqi people are amazing. I have no prejudice, hard feelings towards them for anything. Do I hate terrorists? Hell yes, I do. Do I see their point of view? Yes, I do understand it.

But you still can't have it any way and have it be OK for them not to cover it. You need to at least point out all the points of view. And that's what they should do. And that's kind of my take on the war. I'm upset with it. I'm not upset of what happened to me to a certain point, but it's just that I would like the truth to be told.

And that's my major concern about it.

DOEBELE: The other photo is with the governor.

MENDOZA VALENCIA: The Governor, Mr. Arnold Schwarzenegger. Yes. He is – I honestly do not – and nothing against him – when I thought he took over for governor, I thought, "Wow, he's going to be – do all this politically stuff just to get further his career or whatever."

But you know living in California and seeing what he's trying to do, it's amazing. He is very intelligent, very smart, and willing to do what it takes. And having people not like him because he's not popular but because it's the right thing to do. And that's kind of like, to me, really impressive.

And I admit – I hate to say it, it meant more to me to meet him than to meet the president. And it was – and it also had to do with the fact that I honestly think he is very sincere in what he's trying to do and help California and fix a lot of things that are wrong in our state. Do I still get ooh and ah when I met him? Yes, I did. I mean, that's Conan. That's, you know the guy from Predator. That's you know The Terminator.

I mean, it's amazing to go into his governor's office because he has so much of his movie memorabilia up and displayed and he allows people to touch it. He let us touch like the Conan sword. That, to me, was my highlight of the day. It's like, "I got to touch the Conan sword." That was like the most amazing thing to me that I could ever have done that whole day.

And the other thing is he found out about the Sentinel program and he's like, "We're going to bring this up at the next you know business meeting we have because this is something we should all be doing. This shouldn't be a question of when or why. It's a question about we need to do it."

And that to me was so much more of an impact and an impression that I couldn't believe it. You know, I was just like, "This guy is really sincere and really amazing and he's an immigrant, like myself." So it's kind of like, "Yes, if one of us can do it, we all can," you know?

So it was really a lot of pride and a lot of joy. You know, and it was something that was like really amazing for me. And he was so way down to the earth and like you could talk to him like a person and you can – if you didn't know he was a movie star or the governor, you wouldn't have picked it up. But he just has like this way he carries and presents himself that it's like very inviting and very – you know, he's a big guy. So you know you kind of think he'd be intimidating, but he's not. But I think that really like helped him out.

And you know after talking to him and explaining everything to him, he was like, "This is something we all should be doing." And like I said, not just was – I would vote for the guy again. I don't agree with all his politics specifically but I think he's a person to get a lot of stuff done. And that to me is something that I really, really am impressed on.

DOEBELE: Have you decided who you're going to vote for for president in November?

MENDOZA VALENCIA: I'm iffy. Just on one principle alone is that I like McCain because he's a war vet and he understands war and he understands everything that is associated with it. But I don't think he understands a change. And I think Obama has a slight grasp on it. But I don't think he understands how far – where we've changed. I mean, let alone in California, let alone in the rest of the country.

I mean, you can go online and find out anything and everything nowadays. So people really have no excuse to be 100 percent ignorant any more, in my opinion, unless you just don't have access. And it's – you can find anything and everything and you really can't say, "I don't know."

You know, and to me he's kind of grasping that. And I think this generation especially like – my generation's a little bit more towards – you know, the older generation, I think that's where we're more headed to. But I think like my sisters and my little brother's generation is more – they're more radical and willing to change and accept different things that sometimes blows my mind with it.

And I don't think politics has grasped that yet you know that – you know, some of your conservative views are not exactly going to fit with the new America of nowadays. I mean, you have so many changes happening every day in every state that you don't know what's formal anymore. So it's kind of like – it's great and exciting, but it's also like – and I think honestly if I had to choose someone right now at this moment, it'd probably be Obama because I think he's grasping where we're heading and where we need to go and where we need to sit and where we need to be an example for.

McCain is an example of you know adversity and great you know things that had happened to you and still sticking through. And going through something like that you know being a prisoner for somebody for so long and you know is just something you know that I also have extreme respect for. You know, but I don't think he's willing to go the direction we need to go.

And that's something that kind of makes me think of you know why I should vote the way I'm going to vote. But I guess...

DOEBELE: ...Mr. Obama, Senator Obama, on his bringing the troops home now.

MENDOZA VALENCIA: That's one thing I'm kind of iffy. I mean, I would love to see all my brothers and sisters in the Army come back. But should we leave a gap somewhere where we know there's a potential for someone even worse to come in is my major concern about that.

And I think a lot of people that have been in the military kind of understand that and know that. And they understand you know yes, we're – we shouldn't have gone maybe when we did and we shouldn't have gone with as few people as we did. But we're stuck here and we need to do the right thing.

I don't think an immediate withdrawal would be the best thing. I think we need to give them, "Hey, you've got a year. If you don't do this and this and this, we're out." And I think that's kind of like what we were doing last year. But you know with the election and everything coming up, that kind of took precedent.

You know, so it's kind of like we were kind of heading that way. And I think that was the right way to go. But I want everybody to come back home, be safe, and be you know with their families. But is it the right thing to do? I don't think so. I mean, we're already out there. We already caused all this damage and created this you know hole out there that needs to be filled up. So we might as well finish the job and do it right.

But there's always that concept that you don't want anybody to go through what you did and you want everybody to come home. So it's hard decision. And personally it's something I couldn't make because I don't feel like I have – I'm that strong to say you know, "Go out there and do it."

And that's why I don't think I could have ever been an officer. But I was a good soldier. And that's one thing I'm sure that if – even though they might not like it, they'll do it. And I want them to come home. That's my major

concern. But it needs to be safe for everybody because I still see some of those faces of those kids and I'm wondering, "Are they OK or are they hurt? Or are they dead or, you know is something even worse happened?"

And that's something you don't want to wish for anybody. So I don't think an immediate withdrawal is perfect. It's an idea but I don't think it's a safe one. But it's just my opinion.

DOEBELE: Thank you for letting us come back and do – and find out how things are going with you.

MENDOZA VALENCIA: Oh, thank you for letting me do this again. It was – I was kind of thinking about it the other day. And I'm like, "Wow, I haven't done that in so many years." So it was good. You know, it was kind of like a yes karma saying, "You know, hey, we're knocking back at your door again."

DOEBELE: Thank you.

MENDOZA VALENCIA: Thank you.