

Children's book shows life for a veteran who has returned home

By Washington Post, adapted by Newsela staff on 05.02.18

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Image 1. Sarah and Mike Verardo with their daughters (from left) Mary Scott, 2, Elizabeth, 9 months, and Grace, 3. Photo by: Lindsay Hart

Grace Verardo is 3 years old. She came home one day from preschool. She told her mother, "Someone said Daddy is gross."

Sarah Verardo moved into action. Her husband's war injuries were having a bigger effect on her children than she had realized. Mike Verardo lost his left leg and arm in war. Grace had always known him simply as a "handsome hero." Other people didn't always understand his injuries, though.

Sarah Verardo has gotten used to people staring at her husband. They ask questions about his injuries. Her three daughters are only 3 years old, 2 years old and 9 months old. She realized she needed to teach them to deal with the stares and questions, too.

Hero At Home

She wrote a children's book, "Hero at Home." It's about a military veteran who has a man-made leg known as a prosthetic. He has a wounded arm. He has a brain injury that sometimes causes

him to put his "keys in the fridge and milk in the closet."

She wrote the book for her children and their classmates. She also wanted to reach people around the world, she said. She wanted to teach them about veterans with serious war injuries.

Mike Verardo was a soldier in the Army. He served in the war in southern Afghanistan. That's where he was hit by a bomb in 2010. He was knocked out and badly bruised, but his injuries were mostly to his head.

A few days later, feeling fit for duty, he decided to return to his unit rather than go home to get better. Two weeks after that, he was struck by another bomb. This time, it took off his left leg and arm. It burned about one-third of his body.

The injuries to his body and brain were so serious that he was not expected to live.

Grace's Dad

At the time of that April 2010 attack, Sarah and Mike Verardo were dating. They got married three years later.

At the beginning of her book, readers are introduced to Grace and her father. They also learn about the war that left him wounded.

"This is Grace's dad ... He was sent to Afghanistan to protect America and was wounded in action while fighting for our country ... He wears a special leg that looks like it belongs on a robot. His arms were rebuilt with lots of tools," it reads.

Then it shows a drawing of Grace on her dad's shoulders. In the drawing, he walks with a prosthetic leg and a red cape.

The next page is a critical one. It says something that Sarah Verardo said many people don't understand: "Grace's dad is still working hard to get better."

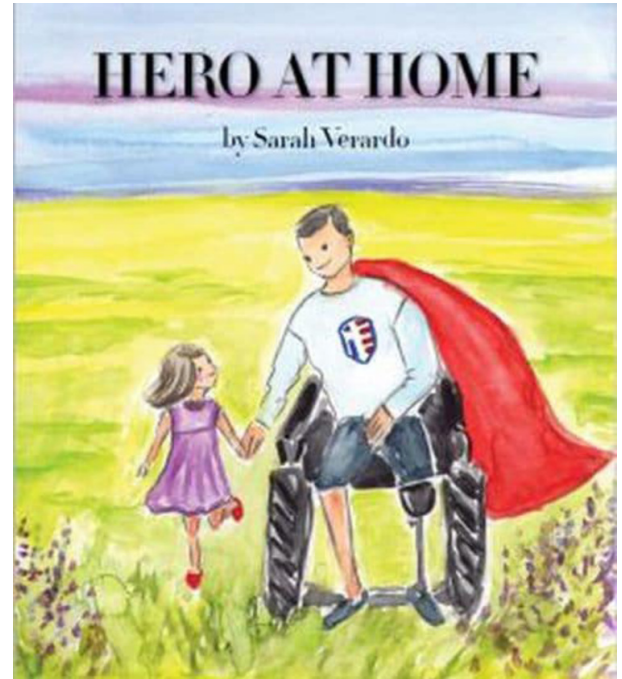
Still Getting Better

Doctors have worked on Mike Verardo's injuries more than 100 times. They continue to do so. His left arm was remade to look like it is healthy. Still, it is paralyzed and cannot move. His serious brain injuries prevent him from working at a job.

Sarah Verardo said she is constantly explaining to people that Mike is still working to get better.

"He's one of the most severely wounded veterans from the war. This is something we will deal with for the rest of his life," she said.

Her husband is shy and turns away from the spotlight. She said he is happy with the book and its empowering message, though.



The Verardos' lives are not easy. They feel lucky that he came home from the war alive, though, even if his body is different.

"Grace's daddy tells her that sometimes people get hurt and their bodies change," reads the book. "But they still have the same heart."