

Play highlights the tragedy of veteran suicide

By Sean Flynn
Staff writer

NEWPORT — Xavier Zavala has served as a Marine Corps infantryman for the past 14 years, including tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan. One of his friends, also a combat veteran, committed suicide.

"If you've been shot at, or had an IED (improvised explosive device) explode next to you, and you were lucky enough to walk away to live another day, you should embrace your life more tightly than ever," Zavala said. "It's a damn shame to waste it with suicide."

Zavala was one of more than 60 people who filled the small Megley Theatre at Salve Regina University on Tuesday night for a performance of the Greek tragedy "Ajax," written by Sophocles more than 2,500 years ago about a theme that remains universal.

Ajax was a veteran of the Trojan War, and characterized by his fellow Greek

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SISTER JANE GERETY

president of Salve Regina University,
where a production of 'Ajax' was
performed Tuesday

combatants as a "maddened warrior." He kills sheep, goats and other animals of the Greeks as part of his descent into madness before he kills himself.

The play was a production of the Pell Center for International Relations and Public Policy, staged by Reader's Theater and directed by Tom Gleadow. The first performance took place on Veterans Day, but there are more performances scheduled.

As part of the Pell Center's "Story in the Public Square" initiative, the play serves as

PLAY A7

Play

Continued from A1

the opening for community conversations about the challenges facing veterans returning from war:

Every day, 22 veterans take their own lives, according to government statistics. That's a suicide every 65 minutes. As shocking as the number is, it may actually be higher.

The figure, released by the Department of Veterans Affairs in February, is based on the agency's own data and numbers reported by 21 states from 1999 through 2011. Those states represent about 40 percent of the U.S. population. The other states, including the two largest (California and Texas) and the fifth-largest (Illinois), did not make data available.

Some deaths remain uncounted. For example, if a veteran intentionally crashes a car or dies of a drug overdose and leaves no note, that death may not be counted as a suicide.

Those statistics, and others like them, were brought up in the forum after the play.

Zavala was one of several veterans in the audience, and his comments kept the audience rapt because he spoke from experience in the battlefield and with colleagues suffering from the impact of war.

"My sentiment is that suicide is the wrong thing to do," he said. "We have an obligation to live and welcome those who return. People should take the gift of life with gratitude."

During the discussion, people wanted to know how to thank a veteran, and what can be done to assist them.

"The best way to thank a veteran is to be a good citizen," Zavala said. "Use your freedom responsibly and contribute to your community in any way you can."

"Don't treat veterans as victims," said Sister Jane Gerety, Salve's president. "Ajax was a suffering man, but he is a noble man and not a victim."

She said nurses are trained to ask men and women if they have served, and to make them aware of the people and resources that are available if they are needed.

Robert Hackey, a visiting fellow at the Pell Center and a professor of health policy and management at Providence College, said ancient Greek drama is an important tool for raising awareness of contemporary policy issues.

"This is so far beyond what we initially envisioned," he told the actors, director and producers after the performance. "I'm just in awe."

Hackey said suicide is now the leading cause of death among people in the nation's armed services.

"In the past couple of years, more have taken their own lives than have died on the battlefield," he said.

He asked more people to be aware of what they can do to welcome back the troops.

"One of the things we want to do is avoid endings like in this play," he said.

Citing a practice pushed by the CEO of Starbucks, he said, "One of the best ways to honor veterans is to hire veterans."

"I try to communicate at least once a week with combat veterans who are friends," said Cory Crew, who played Ajax. "It's an easy thing to do."

The performances of "Ajax" and the following community conversations tonight and Thursday night at the Megley Theatre are booked, but there are still seats available at the Contemporary Theater in South Kingstown on Sunday at 2 p.m.

Other performances include:

◆ Bowab Studio Theater at Providence College, Monday, 7 p.m.

◆ Sandywoods Center for the Arts, Tiverton, Tuesday, 7 p.m.

◆ Blackstone River Theatre, Cumberland, Thursday, Nov. 20, 7 p.m.

"Ajax" was made possible in part by a grant from the Rhode Island Council for the Humanities, an independent affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities. The grant is part of the "Standing Together: The Humanities and the Experience of War" initiative, which supports veterans-related programming within each state.

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