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Unsung Hero: NELSON CASTILLO

For more than a decade, Nelson Castillo has been an integral part of the mine-action community in Ecuador. The founder of two disabled veterans’ organizations, la Asociación de Excombatientes Discapacitados Alto Cenepa and Fundación Futuro, he has been dedicated to improving the conditions faced by mine victims and other disabled military personnel, coordinating mine-awareness campaigns and, in general, working to eradicate the devastating impact of anti-personnel mines.

by Natalie Wall [Mine Action Information Center]

It is almost impossible not to be in awe of a person like Nelson Castillo. His ability to surmount adversity, his strong character and unbreakable desire to help others are some of the traits that make Castillo a hero in the field of mine action. After more than 15 years of military service, Castillo lost both legs in a landmine accident while defending his country during the 1995 Alto Cenepa border conflict between Peru and Ecuador.

"I became very interested in working to save lives," says Castillo. One of his first jobs in the mine-action community was to assist and retraining mine victims by creating data-processing training centers; however, this was not the first thought that crossed Castillo’s mind when the unfortunate incident changed his life forever on 28th February 1995.

"After the mine explosion, and upon seeing myself without my legs and with an intense and unbearable pain, the first thought that crossed my mind was that I was not to use at all," Castillo says. "I wanted to die, to kill myself with my own hands."

But do not do this because the explosion threw me out of reach. Thankfully, they went on to recover and then put his efforts into helping others.

Throughout his 12 years in the mine-action community, Castillo’s hard work and dedication have not gone unnoticed. His character is admired by many. "He has an unbreakable will to do well and help others," says Guillermo Leal, Regional Coordinator for the Organization of American States Program for Comprehensives Action Against Anti-Personnel Mines.

"In 1998, I created the Asociación de Excombatientes Discapacitados Alto Cenepa," Castillo says. "The group is made up of people with disabilities incurred during military service. Castillo was the President of the Asociación de Excombatientes Discapacitados Alto Cenepa for four years. Then, in 2008, Castillo created the Fundación Futuro and served two years as its President. "In these organizations, I worked to obtain a better quality of life for the survivors of anti-personnel mines," says Castillo.

During this time, Castillo also developed the Héroes del Cenepa data processing training course, which instructs disabled military personnel in computer programming. With the help of Microsoft, IBM and the Ecuadorian Army, this course has given disabled military veterans an opportunity to stay employed. It’s an excellent program, taught at the Army’s university, La Escuela Superior Politécnica del Ejército.

"I realized that the soldiers who are injured need assistance to help them to get back on their feet," Castillo says.

Many soldiers have a hard time adjusting to the new tasks given to them through the training and some find it hard to realize that they are still an asset to society, even though they may have been severely injured. "But the U.S. Army believes in them and their part of their body, not their mind."

The training center has surpassed initial expectations. According to Castillo, as of 28 November 2008, approximately 100,000 people have been trained in the data-processing course. This training has allowed soldiers to expand the scope of their studies and has produced many civil and commercial engineers, as well as licensed technicians in orthotics and prosthesis.

"Knowing his strong character for helping others and his outstanding spirit of giving back all, Castillo was offered the opportunity to participate in the Program for Comprehensives Action against Anti-Personnel Mines in Ecuador," Leal says.

"Castillo was named Officer of Prevention Campaigns and Victim Assistance for OAS AICMA in 2003. Presently, in this capacity, Castillo is in charge of the coordination of transportation, lodging, nutritional, medical attention, rehabilitation—both physical and psychological—and social integration for mine victims. He is also in charge of designing communication strategies and developing awareness campaigns about anti-personnel mines. He coordinates the campaigns of prevention with all the populations affected by the mines: the local authorities, mass media, community leaders, schools and the general population." Castillo says Castillo’s greatest accomplishment is “the work carried out by the organizations he has worked with, the people he has touched and the innumerable lives he has saved. Castillo is an asset to many in the mine-action community.

"In spite of all difficulties, Castillo has been able to succeed and make himself an example to others," Or maybe he has, as he tells me that he has been full of achievement, and above all, happiness." Castillo says.

"Castillo says he is very grateful to the Organization of American States for giving him his newest opportunity, that of working in the AICMA to rid the world of landmines, and to the Ecuadorian Army and others who have believed in his abilities. These opportunities have allowed him a productive and fulfilling life. He hopes to continue to positively influence landmine victims.

"The quality of life of the anti-personnel mines victims’ needs improvement. I want the work that is carried out to be done with great humanity and with a lot of love to the victims who have suffered from the consequences of the explosions from anti-personnel mines,” he says. “The survivors of mines are very special people. And he would know, he is one.”

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