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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, the 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 dedicated to assisting 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 28 February 1995. “After the mine explosion, and upon seeing myself without my legs and with an immense and unbearable pain, the first thought that crossed my mind was that I was of no use at all,” Castillo says. “I wanted to die, to kill myself, to end my existence.”

Not do this because the explosion threw my wont to out of reach. Thankfully, 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, National Coordinator, Mine Action program for the OAS. “Knowing his strong character for helping others and his untamable spirit of rising above all, [Castillo] was of course an example to others,” Orozco adds. “[I hope to see his] life full of achievement, and he would know, he is one.”

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 prosthetics.

“Knowing his strong character for helping others and his sustainable spirit of rising above all, [Castillo] was offered the opportunity to participate in the Program for Comprehensive Action Against Anti-Personnel Mines in Ecuador,” Leal says.

Castillo was named Officer of Prevention Campaigns and Victim Assistance for the OAS AICMA in 2003.

Presently, in this capacity, Castillo is in charge of the coordination of transportation, lodging, nutritive, 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. “I coordinate the campaigns of prevention with all the populations affected by the mines: local authorities, mass media, community leaders, schools and the general population,” says Castillo.

“Also, I coordinate the assistance to the victims of anti-personnel mines.”

“With his indomitable will, not even going into extremely dangerous and unknown land could stop Castillo from carrying the message of mine-risk prevention. Castillo says his proudest accomplishments are “the work carried out in the communities of the east in the jungle, and the work with the mine victims”.

Overcoming the challenges of travelling to the jungle as a double-amputee makes an impression on the OAS participants.

Castillo plans to continue working in mine-risk education and hopes to not only save lives, but to end all injury from these munitions. He recommends that all people interested in mine action get involved in the work. “To serve others is very gratifying,” he says.

For the past 12 years Castillo’s work and devotion to others has helped reduce the level of risk by raising awareness. He has provided personal and professional support to many permanently disabled soldiers, and his achievements are shown through 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,” Orozco adds. “I hope to see him live full of achievement, but above all, happiness.”

Castillo says he is very grateful to the Organization of American States for giving him his new 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 new 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’ need improvement,” says Castillo. “I want the work that is carried out to be done with great humanity and with a lot of love to the victims that 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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