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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 one 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 28th June 1995.

“After the mine explosion, and upon seeing myself without my legs and with an intense and unbearable pain, the first thing that crossed my mind was that I was of no use at all,” Castillo says. “I wanted to die, to kill myself with my rifle.” Castillo says, adding, “Nevertheless, we… convince them that they lost part of their body, not their mind.”

The training center has surpassed initial expectations. According to Castillo, as of 28 November 2008, approximately 10,100 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 untarnished spirit of caring above all,” Castillo was offered the opportunity to participate in the Program for Comprehensive Action Against Anti-Personnel Mines, he says.

Castillo was named Officer of Prevention Campaigns and Victim Assistance for the 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. “I coordinate the campaigns with the population affected by the mines: local authorities, mass media, community leaders, schools, and the general population,” says Castillo.

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. “It is difficult to convince the soldiers affected by mines to change their rifle to a computer,” Castillo says, adding, “Nevertheless, we convince them that they lost part of their body, not their mind.”

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 full of achievement, and above all, happiness.”

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 anti-personnel mines. 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 anti-personnel mines.

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