

I STAND TO HONOR MY MILITARY FAMILY, REJECT INJUSTICE AND RACISM

BY ZEKE WATSON

A Perspective

My first grade class in Texas started each day as most other first grade classes. Like an electronic rooster, the intercom would crow and the principal would crackle over the loudspeaker at precisely 8 a.m.

"Please stand for the Pledge of Allegiance," he would say with proper solemnity.

Chairs scooted out from under us as we stood to face the flag fixed near the door.

My six-year-old self did not understand the purpose of that morning ritual, other than to signal that class had begun. It was an empty exercise, rote and dull. We just stood.

We are not wide-eyed little first graders anymore, standing on command. As adults, we do not recite the Pledge much. The National Anthem is our grown up ritual, sung before sports events and some ceremonies.

America's high-minded pledge and anthem are aspirational, especially for people of color and the LGBTQ+ community. It is drug store makeup used to cover this nation's ancient blemishes. Our checkered history has left it smeared and runny, revealing patches of ugliness. Sometimes it is hard for people like me to stand.

Yet I do. So do other people of color and those from the LGBTQ+ community who devoted a portion of their lives to serving this country in the military. I enlisted not out of blind patriotism but for the opportunity. The Navy allowed me to escape small town Texas to begin a new life and a new adventure. During my five years in the Navy I developed a sense of pride for the flag and National Anthem. I stood erect and held a tight salute when called for.

As a Black veteran, though, the rituals can be complicated. America can be a dangerous place if you are Black. A stroll down the street can go well or become fatal in an instant. Sometimes I am praised for serving my country when folks learn I was in the Navy. Other times I feel I should just tuck tail and go home so people – specifically white people – can't profile me.

I do my best to avoid the police. After being racially profiled by San Diego Police during my first visit to the city, it left a disgusting and permanent taste in my mouth.

In 2013 a friend and I were pulled over by SDPD officers after we missed a turn and pulled into a parking lot to reroute ourselves. I saw a police cruiser slip in behind us and turn on its lights. My stomach sank as my mind raced for a reason for the stop. We pulled over, they approached the car and said a taillight was out. A classic line to start a classic "Driving While Black" episode.

We had just driven nearly 2,000 miles without a problem and now our taillight is not working? I felt my blood boil and my jaw tighten as I listened to the lying cops spin their fanciful and condescending tale. I assured the officer that the

light had been working last time I checked – which was true. His disrespectfulness caused my tone to evolve from docile to militant. He did not like that.

We were ordered from our car and told to stand against the hood of the squad car as one of the cops put on a charade like he was smelling something strange emanating from our vehicle.

"Kind-a smells like weed," he said with the mechanical rotteness of a bad actor reciting but not performing his lines.

We had smoked a cigarette before we began our San Diego excursion, but no weed.

Surprise! They found nothing.

I was livid, but swallowed my anger so the cops would not have any excuses to mistreat us further. California was supposed to be progressive, I thought, more progressive than Texas. That encounter damaged my view of police and made me once again ponder my place as a Black man.

It is all so common for Black men to be singled out and treated with suspicion. This type of prejudice casts a dark cloud upon us that seems inescapable. My every step needs to be calculated and carefully mapped out to ensure safety. It is disheartening, exhausting and can leave me feeling helpless.

America does not embody its Pledge of Allegiance or national anthem. This country does not treat

everyone with the same respect or dignity they are entitled to as citizens. Prejudice and violence toward people of color and the LGBTQ+ community is the real daily ritual.

Being a Black veteran in America is tricky.

I still stand proudly for the national anthem and the flag like that wide-eyed first grader standing for the pledge. When I stand, though, it is not a celebration of this country, but respect for my brothers and sisters who took that same military oath of service I once did. I demonstrate solidarity for my friends and those I consider family who are still serving. I stand for them.

I understand why people who identify as Black, Latino, Asian, Indigenous and members of the LGBTQ+ community feel excluded from the embrace of America when they see the flag or hear the National Anthem. These symbols do not always represent our experiences. I understand why many people sit or kneel in protest. It is honorable to protest laws and practices that silence or belittle entire classes of people.

Although I stand for the National Anthem, I will not stand idle and blind to the injustices that diminish our country. I, too, demand change from a country that talks a good game but has yet to ensure "liberty and justice for all."



Alfonso Camacho

MANY ARE SURPRISED BY ABILITIES OF AMERICA'S DISABLED

I am considered to be disabled.

I am far from alone. Nearly 199 million of America's 335 million people are similar to me. We share a need for self-care support and an inability to live independently.

Some folks seem to think we are not worth the bother. Our once and future president is one of them. Fred Trump III, Donald Trump's nephew, said that the president-elect told him people like me "should just die."

Trump savagely mocked a disabled New York Times reporter in 2016 and has viciously trashed disabled people ever since. A president leads by, and Trump is teaching us to dislike and dismiss people with disabilities. I am so insignificant to him he feels free to openly mock people like me.

"Joe Biden became mentally impaired," Trump said during a Wisconsin rally as he inveighed against immigrants. "Kamala was born that way. She was born that way. And if you think about it, only a mentally disabled person could have allowed this to happen to our country."

Trump implicitly told his 73.5 million supporters that mentally impaired individuals are stupid and dangerous. I am a non-speaking autistic individual and I rely on technology or my assistant to communicate. I do some things differently, but I would like to think that I am neither stupid nor dangerous.

People like Trump have made my life excruciatingly hard. The rest of us have choices: Do we follow his example? Do we ignore it? Or do we fight it? What would happen if the 69.2 million Americans who did not vote for Trump modeled kind and non-ableist behavior? That would be a seed of progress.

Most of us want to be kind and embrace all humans, but maybe we don't know how. For generations nondisabled kids have been admonished by parents "don't stare," "look away" and "don't ask" when our childhood curiosity gazes upon a disabled person. We are taught to fear, avoid and ignore people with disabilities.

When folks do interact with disabled people, they often resort to baby language, tapping heads and calling disabled people "buddy" regardless of their age.

The other side of the coin is not any prettier. Disabled individuals like me are trained to become invisible. No one scolds a nervous person who clicks a pen, taps their feet or twirls their hair.

Neurodivergent self-regulating behavior, however, is given the side eye and hit with snide whispering. We are trained not to flap our hands, to hold in our squeals and avoid movements that instinctually soothe our nervous systems.

We are expected to tolerate disrespectful behavior from others, including patronizing language and dismissal. We are trained not to disturb our neurotypical neighbors. We must, at all costs, appear nondisabled to be worthy, even if it means erasing ourselves.

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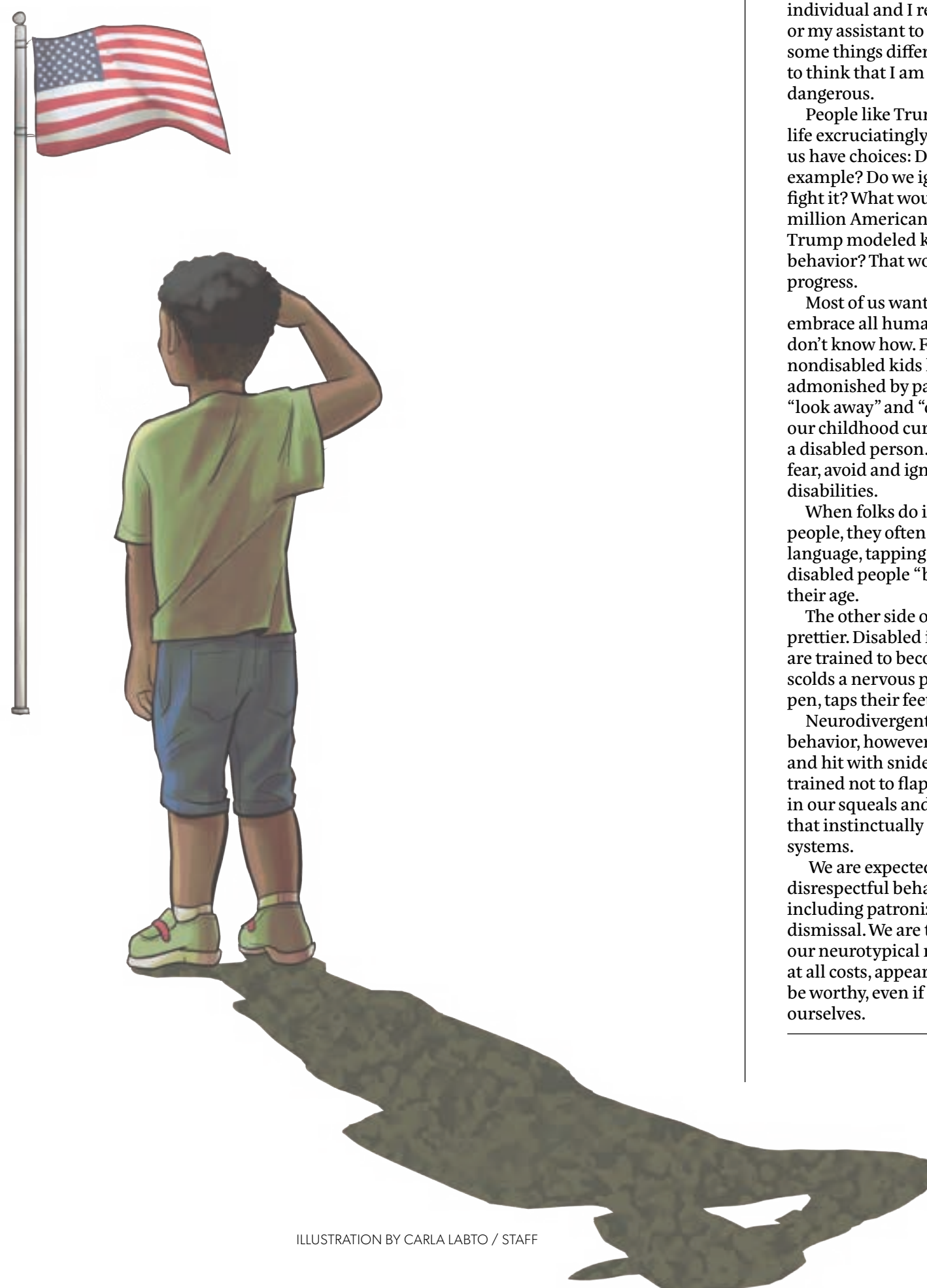


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TITLE IX VERIFICATION IS WAY TOO LAX

BY ANAHY GUTIERREZ

A Perspective

Southwestern College implemented a mandatory sexual assault and violence prevention training this semester in response to Assembly Bill 2683. The state asked for the bare minimum. Southwestern delivered just that.

When women asked for help to stem sexual assault eight years ago, our college ignored them. Now that the State of California is stepping in and requiring training for new students, Southwestern's response is watered down, weak and woeful.

SC's quick-and-dirty approach takes once-over-lightly to a new low. A single email is sent to students to inform them of the newly required training, which consists of a 20-minute video describing sexual harassment and a nine-minute video on preventing it. Students are then encouraged (not required) to review the Title IX and Campus SaVE Act page on the SC website. It explains what Title IX is, how to report harassment, and how to identify harassment and violence. The final step is supposed to verify that students have reviewed the material. A simple poke of the "yes" button completes the training, no reading necessary.

Southwestern's lazy reliance on the honor system is dishonorable and a diss to women. Though legislation did not require a more credible form of verification, there was certainly plenty of time to establish one. AB 2683 was signed into law by Gov. Newsom in September 2022, two years before its 2024 implementation. Southwestern had two years to create an appropriate way for students to prove they have reviewed the material.

It punted.

San Diego Community College District did better. Its Title IX training requires students to view modules, take quizzes and

submit their scores to the college. It is a meaningful form of verification.

Southwestern took the lazy way out. Chela Cholula, Southwestern College Executive Director of Human Resources, said AB 2683 is full of loopholes.

"The law says we have to have access to (student interaction with the sexual assault website), that (students) have to complete by a certain time," she said. "The law doesn't say what happens if (students) don't complete it."

AB 2683 is too vague to be effective, said Cholula.

"The consequence is, we're going to have students who think it's okay to be aggressive even after (a woman) says 'no thank you, I don't want to go on a date with you,'" she said.

The legislation does next to nothing to support transgender people or to educate students about anti-transgender language and actions.

In other words, the real consequence is even more sexual harassment. Title IX training is supposed to prevent sexual harassment, not wink at it.

Southwestern's inept handling of sexual assault in the 2010s led to a campus that was notoriously unsafe for women. Previous student affairs administrators and past campus police officials allowed a toxic culture to fester. A former police chief committed perjury by lying on annual crime reports and manufacturing data. It worsened during the first Trump administration and its "grab 'em by the pussy" braggadocio. Guess who's back.

Cholula acknowledged that there is a lack of awareness among students. She said she would like to develop new strategies to encourage students to take the training seriously.

"Any ideas you have, send them my way," she said. "Whatever I can do to get us off of the mute and so people can see it, I'm down. We're trying."

Image Courtesy of Yam Krikorian / Pexels

ALFONSO

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Underestimating disabled Americans is a national pastime

No society is complete without all of its members, yet America is a nation by and for the neuro-similar. Take a look around. When do we see signs related to people with disabilities? Mainly in parking lots, ramped and other legally mandated areas.

Southwestern is not a truly inclusive campus if the "inclusion"

is hidden away on private corners of the campus. Embracing people like me has got to be more than colorful flags and pins brought for one month every year. Information about people with disabilities should jump off pages and scream joyously from our walls, website and social media. Our campus should be festooned with posters teaching us to "Say hello," "Use a normal voice," "Presume competence," "Please ask before pushing someone's wheelchair" and "Some disabilities are invisible." A campus that expresses support for neurodivergent people is a great first step. The next is to teach and invite our invisible community to join yours. I think you may like us.

Our college is in a particularly powerful position to shape the hearts and minds of our community. We are squandering that power. It is time to think differently.

Southwestern has pockets of deep support for students like me. Melinda Lara, Director of Disability Support Services, said our campus was home to 1,636 disabled students during the 2022-23 academic year who requested accommodations. DSS students may ask for a Student Education Plan that grants extra time to complete in-class assignments and tests, larger fonts, computers that take dictation and other accommodations. Disabled students registered with DSS may also receive priority enrollment.

Southwestern's Learning Center also provides support for neurodivergent students. Elizabeth Kozel leads the college Tutorial Center which employs 142 full-time and part-time tutors.

"We have tutors hired specifically under Disability Support Services, EOPS and Veterans Services," she said. "If you are (part of) any of those special populations and you're meeting with one of those tutors, you can actually get double time (for tests)."

Accommodations help level the playing field academically for disabled students, but that is just the bare minimum. Disabled students find it exceedingly difficult to join clubs and engage in

integrating activities. We appreciate what is mandated, but we are looking for so much more. We want to be included.

We must create a world that goes beyond the legal minimum. I am a young man forced to use women's bathrooms because my assistant is female. I get super nasty looks if I don't make my disability evident. I would so appreciate a gender-neutral bathroom option that would allow everyone to be comfortable.

I am one of the lucky ones. I have found a haven of equality, friendship and peer respect at Southwestern College. My professor sees me and values me for who I am. Imagine if all students felt that.

If we can dream it, we can do it.