

## **Iraq War Vet Learning New Way to Serve, Protect at Keiser**

Aug. 2--It was a life-changing moment for Mia Portilla when terrorists attacked the United States on Sept. 11, 2001.

After initial feelings of disbelief and anger, she decided to enlist in the Army.

"The attacks kind of pushed me into going in there. I wanted to do something good for America," she said.

Within a month of the United States' invasion of Iraq in 2003, Portilla found herself assigned to a fuel supply unit near Baghdad International Airport.

"I didn't think I was going to Iraq, but if I had to, they weren't going to mess with me," she said.

She suddenly found herself in a dangerous, difficult environment with none of the comforts of home.

"I had never been in a situation where you are fighting for your survival on a daily basis," she said.

Her unit, which in a four-month period pumped 24 million gallons of fuel to U.S. forces in the area, faced frequent enemy attacks.

The fuel tankers were natural targets. In one unnerving instance, a pat-down search of Iraqis who worked at the fueling depot revealed maps of the sleeping locations for company leaders.

Portilla was medically discharged in 2004 after serving eight months of her tour, suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome and physical injuries that gave her a 40 percent disability.

After her discharge, she came to Florida to visit her grandparents in Sun City Center and her mother at Heritage Harbour.

"I just came down here for a visit to see my mom and ending up finding Keiser College," she said.

Portilla, now 29, has since earned an associate degree in crime scene technology and is now working on her bachelor's degree in criminal justice.

She is also an intern in the Sarasota County Sheriff's Office crime lab. Even while she continues her education, carrying a 4.0 grade point average, she shops the market for a job.

But because of the popularity of TV crime programs, "the competition is fierce" to get into the field, she said.

Her interest in crime scene investigation predates the field's current popularity.

"I'm a big, square nerd. I'm a big reader and I love using my mind to solve problems," she said.

The **Horatio Alger Association** recently announced that Portilla is among vets who served honorably in Afghanistan or Iraq who have received scholarships to help continue their education.

The association's Web site says that it seeks to assist students "who have demonstrated integrity, perseverance in overcoming adversity, strength of character, financial need, a good academic record, commitment to pursue a college education and a desire to contribute to society."

The enrollment period for a **Horatio Alger scholarship** runs through Sept. 28. Applications can be found online at [www.horatioalger.org/scholarships\\_military/](http://www.horatioalger.org/scholarships_military/) ([http://www.horatioalger.org/scholarships\\_military/](http://www.horatioalger.org/scholarships_military/)).

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