

Army vet transitions to civilian student life

By **ABBY WEINGARTEN**
CORRESPONDENT

EAST MANATEE — Since returning from Iraq in November 2003, U.S. Army veteran **Mia K. Portilla** has been fraught with dark dreams. Consuming her thoughts are the five soldiers who died on her post and the thousands of troops still overseas.

The path back to normalcy is a toil, but her pursuit of a higher education is easing the transition.

Portilla recently received the Horatio Alger Military Veterans Scholarship, which provides substantial financial aid to qualified students who served in the U.S. military during Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan or Operation Iraqi Freedom. Formerly active in the latter, Portilla was medically discharged early on because of knee and shin injuries.

Now she is pursuing a bachelor's degree in crime scene technology and forensic science at Keiser University, and the \$5,000 scholarship will help foster the goal.

In the meantime, Portilla, who lives with her mother in East Manatee, is still recovering from the past and endeavoring to move on as a civilian.

"The majority of my military experience was during the war in Iraq. We were one of the first companies to go, right after the March attacks the U.S. made on Baghdad," Portilla said.

"I'm a different person since going through that. My sleep patterns are different. I can't sleep unless it's pitch black and silent." She says she is a little disoriented; "doctors say it's due to post-traumatic stress disorder."

Portilla, originally from California, enlisted in the Army in Sacramento in 2002 to become a topographical analyst, or mapmaker. Halfway through her training, she was reclassified as a fueler, issuing large amounts of gas to vehicles like generators. She later learned to drive petroleum trucks in Fort Leonard Wood, Mo., before damaging her lower extremities and suffering severe tendinitis.

In April 2003, still ailing, she was deployed to Iraq.

While her company (the 53rd Quartermaster Unit) finished the year there, she flew home and left the military in September 2004.

"The attacks were a couple times a week at first and went to every day, then a couple times a day," she said. "In Iraq, you're not fighting an army. You're fighting against civilians who



COURTESY PHOTO

Army veteran Mia K. Portilla, right, says her grandmother Angeles Portilla is proud of her college accomplishments. Angeles Portilla had to give up college during World War II in her native Madrid, Spain.

don't want you in their country. I can't really blame them."

Portilla's story and those of 19 other veterans will be featured in an upcoming compilation from the Horatio Alger Association of Distinguished Americans, a nonprofit organization founded in 1947. Its purpose, according to the mission statement, is to honor "the achievements of outstanding individuals in our society who have succeeded in spite of adversity."

Shortly after Sept. 11, 2001, Member Ambassador **George Argyros** and his wife, **Julia**, created the scholarship to offer veterans "educational opportunities that may result in an easier transition to civilian life," they said.

The program officially began in June 2005 with the Argyros' donation of \$10 million.

"We strongly believe that our returning veterans who have fought for our national security should receive something in return," **Dennis R. Washington**, chairman of the Horatio Alger Association, said in a statement. "And I am so pleased that we are able to continue to offer the scholarship."

As for Portilla, life is continuing more fluidly because of the scholarship. She is slated to graduate in 2008 and is currently tackling an internship in the crime laboratory at the Sarasota County Sheriff's Office. She also spent a year overseeing autopsies as an intern at the District 12 Medical Exam-



COURTESY PHOTO

Mia K. Portilla, who is now pursuing a bachelor's degree, graduated a year ago from a two-year program.

ASSOCIATION SHARES SUCCESS STORIES

The **Horatio Alger Association of Distinguished Americans Inc.** has awarded scholarships to 1,460 military veterans.

Twenty recipients, including Mia K. Portilla of East Manatee, have shared their personal stories of overcoming adversity, how their time spent in defense of the United States has changed them and how they are starting their lives over with the help of a Horatio Alger scholarship. The stories will be presented in a compilation by the association complete with photos and a list of scholarship recipients and sponsors.

Eligible students may apply for a scholarship through Sept. 28. For an application or more information about the scholarships, call (703) 684-9444 or visit www.horatioalger.org.

er's Office in Sarasota.

The memories remain, and the more Portilla shares her experiences, the more the pain lessens.

"It was so hard over there in Iraq.

That is the hardest thing, other than being a teenager, that I ever had to go through," Portilla said. "My heart goes out to each and every soldier that is out there."