



Actor Ed O'Neill, standing, plays a Navy veteran on the Emmy-winning comedy *Modern Family*, hailed by *Got Your 6* as a show with a well-rounded perspective on veterans.

PETER "HOPPER" STONE/ABC

CHANGING THE CHANNEL

Veterans group **Got Your 6** uses Hollywood to shatter stereotypes

By Matt Alderton

IN A 2013 EPISODE of NBC's *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, actor Eion Bailey stars as Frank Patterson, an Iraq War veteran who has post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Titled "Traumatic Wound," the episode follows Patterson as he attempts to recall the sexual assault of a teenage girl at the club where he's a security guard. Pyrotechnics triggered his PTSD on the night of the assault, causing him to suppress the memory. Patterson initially is a suspect, but after his memory

returns, he's exonerated — saving the day by testifying against the actual assailants in court.

The character portrayal is typical of veterans: In films and on TV, they almost exclusively are either villains who do bad things because of PTSD or heroes who do good things in spite of it. In the course of one 60-minute episode, Patterson is both.

Such black-and-white portraits make Army veteran Rob Gordon cringe. That's why he helped establish *Got Your 6*, a coalition of partners working to bridge the gap between veterans and civilians by

promoting accurate portrayals of veterans in media and entertainment.

"Because it reaches millions of people of all ages across the country, we believe that the entertainment industry plays a vital role in America by shaping perceptions that can then shape and affect behavior," said Gordon, president of Be The Change Inc., the non-profit organization that created *Got Your 6*. "We want to get across that our veterans are not broken heroes, but rather civic assets. The entertainment industry

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can help to great effect to get that done.”

Got Your 6 traces its roots to 2009, when Be the Change launched “ServiceNation: Mission Serve,” an initiative connecting civilian and military communities through shared volunteerism. That initiative became Got Your 6 — “I’ve got your back” in military slang — in 2011, when it convened major Hollywood studios, networks, talent agencies and guilds for a yearlong discussion of veterans’ issues.

“Roughly one percent of the American public has served in the military; 99 percent have not,” Gordon said. “As we wind down from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, we want to ensure that there is some authenticity in terms of the 99 percent understanding not only what veterans went through, but also the skillsets they have developed that can be beneficial in strengthening our communities.”

After attending a Got Your 6 summit, film and TV producer and director Charlie Ebersol was inspired to help the coalition launch a new signature program: 6 Certified. Informed in part by a 2014 survey commissioned by Got Your 6 showing that Americans believe post-9/11 veterans are more likely than civilians to suffer from mental health

issues (82 percent believe this, according to the survey), suicide (75 percent), addiction (61 percent) and unemployment (60 percent), it recognizes and rewards films and TV shows that contain a “representative and balanced” depiction of veterans.

“Veterans are highly trained men and women whose experience and education we’ve spent hundreds of millions of dollars investing in, and yet Americans when polled ... think of them as being either heroes or victims,” said Ebersol, whose firm, The Company, is executive producer of USA Network’s *NFL Characters Unite* and co-producer of CNBC’s *The Profit*. “When you think about it, that’s the most ludicrous, bipolar description of soldiers.”

Ebersol had seen programs like *Will & Grace* and NBC’s *TODAY* change public perception of homosexuality and cancer screening, respectively, by normalizing gay characters and colonoscopies. He hypothesized that Hollywood could similarly shape public perception of veterans and change negative stereotypes that have

made it difficult for veterans to establish relationships, find jobs and otherwise reintegrate into civilian life.

“There were 22 million people watching *Will & Grace* at the height of that show,” Ebersol continued. “What else has that kind of reach?”

So far, Got Your 6 has certified six projects — the films *American Sniper* and *Amira & Sam*; Season 20 of *Dancing with the Stars* (the spring 2015 edition featured disabled Army vet Noah Galloway, who came in third); and episodes of the TV shows *Hawaii Five-O*, *The Night Shift* and *Modern Family*. Each completed one of the following six actions to become certified: pre-production research with veterans, portraying a veteran character, casting a veteran actor, hiring a veteran writer, telling a veteran story, using veterans as consultants on set or in writers’ rooms.

Ed O’Neill’s character in *Modern Family*, Jay Pritchett, is characteristic of the bunch.

“The fact that he’s a (Navy) veteran enhances his character,” Ebersol said of Pritchett, who is portrayed not only as a veteran, but also a father,

husband and business owner. “He’s got a sense of duty and honor that the military bestowed on him, but it’s not his defining characteristic.”

Seeing more characters like Jay Pritchett — and fewer like Frank Patterson — will make Americans more likely to support veterans like him, said Army veteran Spencer Kympton, president of The Mission Continues, a nonprofit that helps veterans find post-military purpose by leveraging their skills in community service projects.

“Got Your 6 has changed how veterans are seen and portrayed in mainstream media in a way that’s more asset-driven, as opposed to liability-driven,” explained Kympton, whose organization is a member of the Got Your 6 coalition. “It’s helping us tell the positive story of this generation of veterans — the story of their continued service in their communities despite the challenges they face coming home.”

“The more of those stories we can tell, the more effective we as veterans’ service organizations can be.” ●

GOT YOUR 6 CERTIFIED

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- ▶ Portraying a veteran character
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- ▶ Hiring a veteran writer
- ▶ Telling a veteran story
- ▶ Using veterans as consultants on set or in writers’ rooms



NORMAN SHAPIRO/CBS

CBS’s *Hawaii Five-O* features the character of former Navy SEAL Steve McGarrett, played by Alex O’Loughlin, with co-star Grace Park. Got Your 6 certified this television show because its veteran characters are shown to be “leaders and problem-solvers.”



RICH FURY/INVISION FOR PRODUCERS GUILD OF AMERICA/AP IMAGES

Producer/director Charlie Ebersol helped create the 6 Certified program after seeing how Hollywood helped to influence the image of other misunderstood groups.