

## ‘Letters from Abu Ghraib’

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Mother of deceased Iraq war veteran brings her son’s message to Stark County.

**NORTH CANTON** On Saturday, the mother of an Iraq war veteran-turned Catholic peace activist will share the story of her son’s journey and his work for justice until his untimely death in 2010.

Kristi Casteel, mother of the late Joshua Casteel of Dubuque, Iowa, will take part in a discussion panel at 10 a.m. at the Alliance Catholic Worker Joshua Casteel **House** at 830 S. Freedom Ave. in Alliance.

The event will include readings from Joshua Casteel’s book, “Letters From Abu Ghraib,” which is in its second printing.

Casteel, 31, served as an interrogator at Abu Ghraib in Iraq, which became infamous after some American soldiers were court-martialed for humiliating and torturing Iraqi prisoners. He converted to Catholicism upon leaving the military and became an author, playwright and advocate for peace.

“Joshua was a person who was anything but a shallow person,” Kristi Casteel said while visiting Walsh University on Friday. “He was a deep thinker. His faith was important to him.”

The Casteel House was opened in 2013 by Bishop John Michael Botean, head of the Romanian Catholic Diocese of Canton. An outreach for the surrounding neighborhood, it formerly housed St. Theodore’s Social Hall.

“My husband and I were Protestant Evangelicals for 36 years. He came along,” Kristi Casteel said, laughing. “We went to different churches because we moved fairly often, but he connected to Catholicism. Joshua always leaned towards the very philosophical and traditional. He wanted a

church that went back to its (Christianity) roots.”

## **The turning point**

Joshua Casteel was accepted into West Point, a goal he had worked toward since he was 14, his mother said.

“It was more about the education and the leadership aspects, than the military,” his mother said.

But it wasn’t good fit.

“The first month, he realized it wasn’t for him,” she said.

Casteel eventually transferred to University of Iowa, where he enrolled in ROTC. The Sept. 11, 2001 terror attacks occurred shortly after his graduation, and Casteel re-enlisted to become an Arabic-language linguist and interrogator. But he still struggled with being in the military.

“He knew he was being deployed to Iraq and would be stationed at Abu Gharaib and tried to make the best of it,” his mother said. “But he quickly saw the reality. He was so disheartened by what he was seeing. He said only about 10 percent of those guys were guilty of something. The rest were just swept up; caught in the wrong place at he wrong time.”

“Letters From Abu Ghraib” details Casteel’s experiences at the prison, and a life-changing encounter with an detainee.

“It all climaxed with an interrogation of a young jihadist, who told him everything,” Kristi Casteel said, “As if he was (acknowledging) his long imprisonment, but the interrogation turned into a conversation.”

## **God’s purpose**

The two young men started talking about their respective faiths, Krsiti Casteel said.

“Joshua said he realized he was talking to his Muslim counterpart,” she said. “The jidadist told him ‘You’re Christian, but you don’t follow Jesus’ teachings about loving your enemies and turning the other cheek.’ It was a turning point.”

Casteel applied for conscientious objector status, and was reassigned to duty on the “burn pits.”

“It’s how the Army got rid of its waste, from body parts to computers” said Kristi Casteel, who is convinced that exposure to the smoke caused her son’s cancer, as well as many others. “The guys called it the ‘black crud.’”

Joshua Casteel came home and acquired a master’s degree in playwriting and nonfiction writing. He was diagnosed with adrenal carcinoma in 2011. By the time it was discovered, he was in stage 4.

“From the time he was very young, he knew God had a purpose for his life,” his mother said. “He wanted people to think deeply about life, about issues and decisions they make, and God and how all that relates.”

Kristi Casteel and her husband, who died a year before her son, also converted to Catholicism.

“One aspect that drew me is the reverence,” she said. “As Evangelicals, we can get a little too buddy-buddy with God.”

Today, she heads the Joshua Casteel Foundation, a nonprofit which advocates for peace, justice and reconciliation.

## **Peace and personalism**

Walsh theology Professor Joseph Torma, who helped to organize Casteel House and Catholic Workers member Anne Weeks said peace is the essence of the ministry.

“It undergirds everything we are,” she said. “Peacemaking is first and foremost. Josh’s example can help everybody. He lived it.”

“People don’t know Catholic Workers has always been willing to conscientiously object to aspects of society that are immoral,” Torma said. “Joshua had to pay the cost, as does anybody standing against what people consider sacred, which is the culture. That’s most people’s God. As a Catholic Worker, you have to obey God and not men, even if it’s the law. We are conditioned to think that if it’s legal, it must be moral.”

Week said real faith is more than worship; it also requires treating others as family.

Kristi Casteel said her son would be deeply dismayed about the division in the country.

“Joshua was about caring for people and seeing others as valuable,” his mother said. “I think he’d be incensed with a lot of what’s going on. He wasn’t a protestor at heart, but I think he’d be hurting and feeling extremely sad. He wasn’t one to sit on the sidelines and let it happen.”

For more information, please visit [www.joshuacasteel.com](http://www.joshuacasteel.com)

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