

Children's book depicts life at home for an injured veteran father of three

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Image 1. Sarah and Mike Verardo with their daughters (from left) Mary Scott, 2, Elizabeth, 9 months, and Grace, 3. Photo by: Lindsay Hart

Grace Verardo came home one day from preschool. She told her mother, "Someone said Daddy is gross."

Sarah Verardo spun into action. Her husband's war injuries were having a broader effect on her children than she had realized. Mike Verardo lost his left leg and arm in war, but Grace had always known him simply as a "handsome hero."

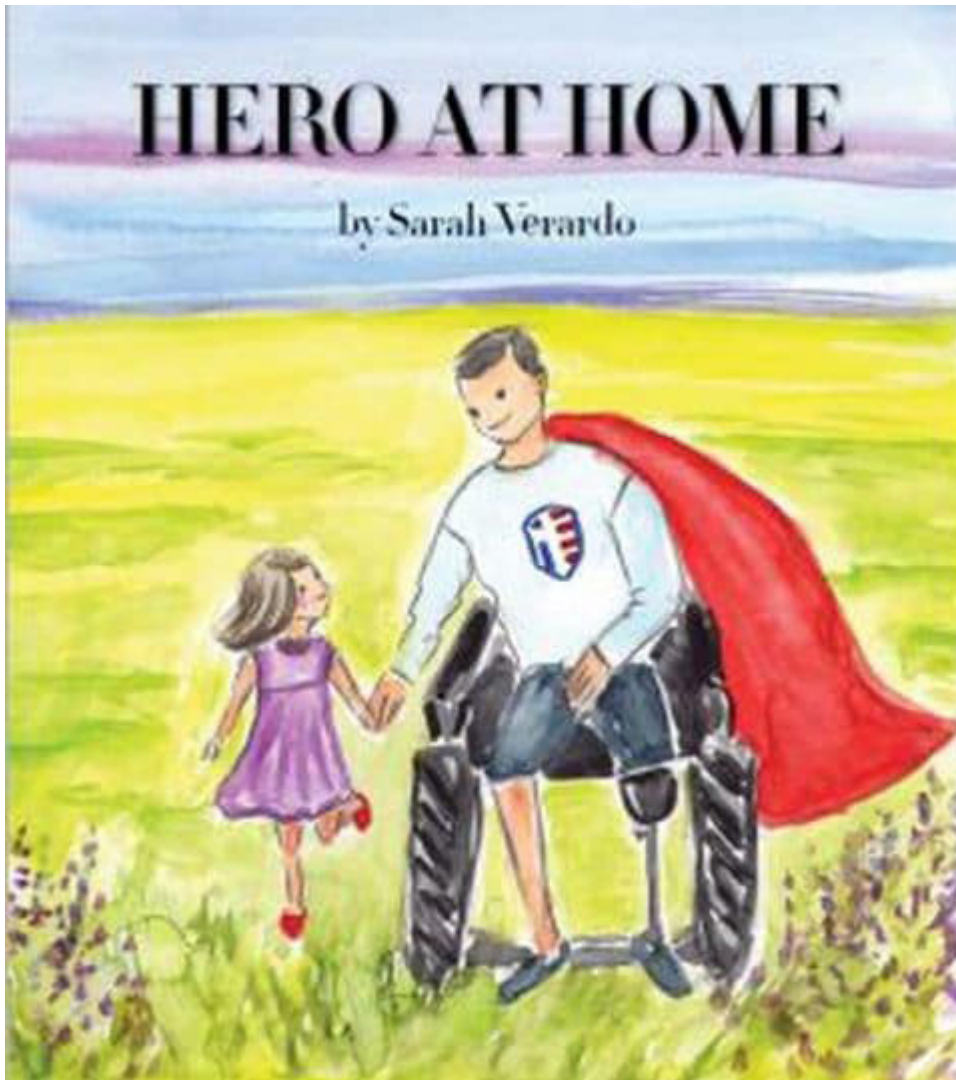
Teaching About Veterans At Home

Sarah Verardo, 33, has gotten used to people staring at her husband and asking questions about his injuries. Her three daughters are only 3 years old, 2 years old and 9 months old. She realized she needed to teach them to deal with the stares and questions, too.

She wrote and self-published a children's book, "Hero at Home." It's about a military veteran who has a man-made leg known as a prosthetic. He has a wounded arm and a brain injury that sometimes causes him to put his "keys in the fridge and milk in the closet."

She wrote the book for her children and their classmates. She also wanted to reach people around the world who want to better understand veterans with severe war injuries, she said.

"The most important thing I do is keep his dignity and my children's dignity. That was being challenged," she said. "I wanted to explain to people: This is what it's like to live with war."



Mike Verardo's Injuries

Mike Verardo, 33, was an Army soldier. He was hit by a bomb in southern Afghanistan in 2010. He was knocked unconscious and badly bruised, but his injuries were mostly to his head.

A few days later, feeling fit for duty, he decided to return to his unit rather than go home to heal. Two weeks after that, he was struck by another bomb. This time, it took off his left leg, paralyzed his arm and burned about one-third of his body.

The injuries to his body and brain were so serious that he was not expected to live.

At the time of that April 2010 attack, Sarah and Mike Verardo were dating. They got married three years later. Sarah Verardo said their lives are not easy, but "our blessings far outweigh our burdens."

At the beginning of her book, readers are introduced to Grace, her father and the war that left him wounded.

"This is Grace's dad ... He was sent to Afghanistan to protect America and was wounded in action while fighting for our country ... He wears a special leg that looks like it belongs on a robot. His arms were rebuilt with lots of tools," it reads.

Then it shows a drawing of Grace on her dad's shoulders as he walks with a prosthetic leg and a red cape.

Still Working To Get Better

The next page is a critical one. It says something that Sarah Verardo said many people don't understand, "Grace's dad is still working hard to get better."

Doctors have worked on Mike Verardo's injuries more than 100 times, with more in his future. His left arm was remade for appearances but is still paralyzed. His serious brain injuries prevent him from having a full daily life and holding a job.

The idea of ongoing healing is something Sarah Verardo said she is constantly explaining to people.

"Mike has a very complicated medical case," she said. "He's one of the most severely wounded veterans from the war. This is something we will deal with for the rest of his life."

Empowering Message In Book

Her husband is shy and turns away from too much attention. She said he is happy with the book and its empowering message, though.

The Verardos' lives are not easy. They feel lucky that he came home from the war alive, though, even if his body is different.

"Grace's daddy tells her that sometimes people get hurt and their bodies change," reads the book. "But they still have the same heart."