

Mommy, Doctor, Soldier, Wife

By Hope Keller

Photography by Bryan Burris



Laura Herrera is making fruit salad at the sink, refusing help, while a crowd of friends mills around her kitchen all talking at once. The dining room is jammed too, with friends, colleagues and children, everyone here to see Laura. The mood is ebullient and not just because of the bowl of sangria that's going fast.

Everyone's reeling happy because Laura — Baltimore City's chief medical officer and deputy health commissioner and the mother of two and stepmother of four — is home. She just got back from Iraq, where she was stationed briefly at a U.S.-run prison camp in the southern desert. The mood is vast relief.

In early February, Laura Herrera, MD, MPH, was steeling herself to tell her children, 5 and 7, that she was going back into the Army and would be away for a few months. A decorated major in the U.S. Army Reserves, Dr. Herrera had been called up for a 90-day tour of duty in Iraq. Her two previous tours, in 2004 and 2005, were both at bases in the United States.

"It seems unreal," she said of her impending departure for a war zone. "That's what has me scared the most."

Saying this she is perfectly composed and chic in high-heeled, giraffe-print pumps, her legs crossed at the ankle to reveal a tattoo of her children's astrological signs. "I had that done in Texas," she says, during her deployment at Fort Bliss.

"I worry about my kids," she continues. "This is their third go-round. They're of an age when I don't want to be away for long. They expect you to be around."

Dr. Herrera, 42, did not expect to be called up a third time; she resigned her commission in October 2007. After nearly 10 years in the reserves, the Roland Park resident wanted to focus on her family and work.

"She's terrific," says Dr. Joshua Sharfstein, Baltimore's health commissioner. "I joke that we need a Laura Herrera video game on our website to encourage people to go into public health. She can take on any challenge. It's extremely hard to faze her. "

She wasn't fazed by her orders, but she appealed them. The Army held firm. A call from Fort Benning in Georgia sealed the deal: She got off the phone and told her husband she had to go to Iraq. Then she went grocery shopping.

As soon as she was out of the house, her husband, Bob Paff, picked up the phone and dialed the number of the person who had just called his wife.

He reached the man who had Laura's Army file. Her resignation had been held up because of a clerical error, the man said. A sheet of paper had gone astray on someone's desk and a signature was missing; the file was incomplete. Mistake or not, Dr. Herrera was due at Fort Benning in early March to be processed and outfitted for Iraq.

She went. She left Baltimore on March 22, then flew out of Fort Benning on March 31 for Kuwait and Iraq.

Home was now a huge tent housing 60 women soldiers. Because of her rank she managed to land a coveted bottom bunk, metal slats laid with a thin floral mattress bent into a U from years of use.

"That was my view," she says, showing digital pictures of her quarters to a crowd of women in her kitchen.

Other photos show low military buildings set against a yellow-gray sky and the flat desert stretching away.

Camp Bucca, the biggest U.S. compound for Iraqi prisoners of war, has been the site of two bloody uprisings. In 2005 it held approximately 8,000 inmates. Now it has 20,000, and the U.S. government recently paid \$110 million to expand it to accommodate 30,000.

Dr. Herrera spent her first week touring the prison and its hospital. She was to start work on Monday, April 7.

Back in Baltimore, Bob Paff was on a mission to get his wife back. "I've got 7-year-old who wants to know if his mother is going to die," he recounts. "Laura was on the plane and I'm on the phone working this thing; I'm not stopping." Dr. Herrera had left her husband a card asking him to bury her, if necessary, in Baltimore instead of her native New York, so that he and the children could visit her.

On March 31, Paff headed to Washington, D.C., to petition Maryland's congressional delegation. He prowled the halls and talked to everyone he could find. He's still not sure who did it — who got his wife's file completed and revoked her deployment — but he thinks it was the mysterious man who answered the phone at Fort Benning.

He got the news from Laura, who called just before midnight Baltimore time on Sunday, April 6. She apologized for waking him up, then said she was coming home. She was

crying, partly from exasperation with her husband, whom she'd made promise that he would not try to get her out of her service.

She'd been out in the field when someone came to get her. "You're out of here; you're going home," he said. She boarded a Black Hawk helicopter the next morning to fly across the Kuwait border, then was driven across Kuwait to another base. From there she got a flight to Ireland, then another to Georgia to be outprocessed and to hand in her gear. She arrived in Baltimore late the night of Wednesday, April 9.

Dr. Herrera is grateful to be home, but she is haunted by those who are not. "People are on their fifth tour," she says. "These are soldiers that have kids. There are plenty of people going through this, especially single mothers."

Her daughter comes in from the dining room to ask if they can cut the cake now. She's dark-haired and beautiful, the spitting image of her mother, who says yes, of course, and heads into the other room. She's home.

Copyright 2008 Baltimore SmartWoman

Issue Date: View May/June 2008, Posted On: 4/30/2008

PPG 46226 (9/08)