

Forbes



Paul Rieckhoff, Contributor

LEADERSHIP

11/11/2011 @ 7:58AM | 1,301 views

11/11/11- Not Just a Funky Date

+ Comment now

Stephen Colbert, Brian Williams, Norah Jones and...Aaron Mankin?

In a night full of stars, it was the humble kid from Arkansas who stole the show.

In 2005, Retired Marine Corporal Aaron Mankin was seriously wounded in Iraq when an IED destroyed his vehicle, fatally wounding six other Marines. He escaped alive, but with horrific burns over a quarter of his body, and a disfigured face. Six years and nearly 60 surgeries later, he is now a spokesperson for UCLA's **Operation Mend** – the revolutionary program that saved his life.

And last night, after receiving IAVA's *2011 Veteran Leadership Award* at the Fifth Annual Heroes Gala in New York City, Aaron left the whole room at the historic Cipriani 42 speechless and inspired – and there wasn't a dry eye in the house.

While the night belonged to Aaron and the nearly 2.3 million other veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan, IAVA's Gala served as just a prelude to the biggest day of the week – 11/11/11.

With the Iraq War set to end soon and the Afghanistan War entering its second decade following the death of Osama bin Laden, this may be the biggest and most important Veterans Day for our community ever.

So we're celebrating in a big way. From Atlanta to San Francisco and Dallas to Chicago, hundreds of IAVA Member Veterans and supporters will be leading marches and events all across the country. And in New York City, at our country's largest Veterans Day parade, nearly

500 Iraq and Afghanistan veterans will be marching up Fifth Avenue behind Aaron, reminding the country that they are the New Greatest Generation. They served bravely overseas, and now, they're ready for their opportunity to serve at home.

Earlier this year, IAVA launched our **Combat to Career** campaign to help create and facilitate those opportunities. We set an ambitious goal of lowering the absurdly high new veteran unemployment rate by 11/11/11, by working with both the public and private sectors. Though vet unemployment isn't going away anytime soon, we have been making big dents in it throughout the year.

On the private sector side, IAVA hosted our first of many **Smart Job Fairs**, where we brought hundreds of vets out to meet with employers who were ready and able to hire veterans, properly resourced them with GI Bill trainings and resume workshops, and helped them create networks of peers.

And we ensured that Washington stepped up to play their part by pushing for comprehensive jobs legislation – and huge progress is happening on that front. Just yesterday, the **Senate passed the VOW to Hire Heroes Act** in a bipartisan and unanimous show of support for new vets.

Bipartisanship? Clear action? A unanimous vote? That's not something you see every day in this Congress.

The fight isn't over yet – now we're making sure the House votes to stand with the Senate, and gets the bill to the President's desk as soon as possible. With **new veteran unemployment rising for the second straight month** – and still significantly higher than the civilian rate – the time to act is now.

Just as the private sector and Washington have been stepping up, we need Americans to do as well. Less than 1% of Americans have served in Iraq or Afghanistan, and they're counting on the other 99% to ensure their sacrifice and service are never forgotten.

You can help by funding the fight. This Veterans Day, show your support for those who served by **making a donation to invest in America's New Greatest Generation**. Or text **IAVA** to **20222** to **donate \$10** from your cell phone.

New veterans are an investment for the entire country. They represent exactly what America needs right now to rebuild its economy and propel its future: leadership, resilience and a commitment to serve. They're a generation who can turn our country around – and who can lead America into the future.

The New Greatest Generation is America's future. And that's why we should invest in their potential – not just on Veterans Day, but *every day* of the year. And it starts on 11/11/11.