

Michael Reagan was a Marine during the Vietnam War and weeks away from coming home in 1968 when he and his unit were attacked with rockets. The strike hit a close friend, whom Mike cradled in his arms as he was dying.

“At the last second he looked at me and said, ‘Mike I just want to go home’ and he died,” recalls Reagan of that heartbreaking moment. “I see his face every day.”

When Reagan returned home grateful to be alive, “I knew I had a debt,” he tells PEOPLE.

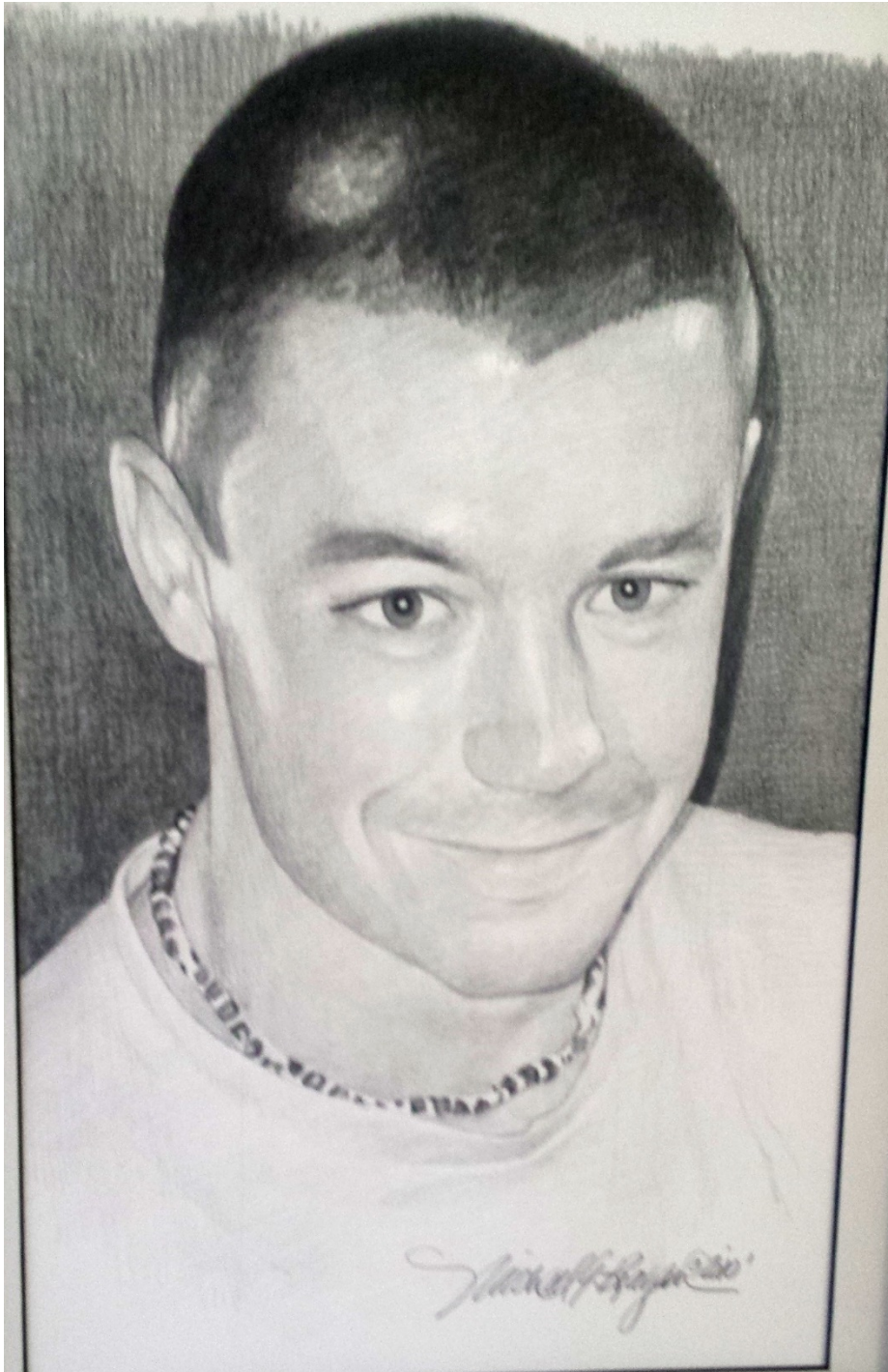
Reagan, an artist who worked for the University of Washington, found a way to begin repaying that debt. He drew signed portraits of the biggest celebrities in the world that were auctioned off at charity events benefitting children and cancer research, raising over \$10 million dollars for the nonprofits.



But in 2004, Reagan, now 70, of Edmonds, Washington, found what he calls his “destiny”: drawing (for free) lifelike pencil portraits of servicemen and women killed in Iraq and Afghanistan for loved ones who ask.

So far, Reagan has sketched more than 5,000 service members through his nonprofit [Fallen Heroes Project](#), and takes no payment for any drawing. Supplies are funded by small donations; a backlog of requests is over 50 men and women long.

Families are struck by how powerful, and comforting, the drawings are when they first arrive in the mail.



“I cried, I gasped,” says Julie Schrock, 59, of Lone Tree, Colorado, whose son Max Donahue died in 2010 after he was hit by an improvised explosive device. “And I touched it like I was touching his face, because in a way I felt I was. And his eyes, I felt like Max was looking at me.”

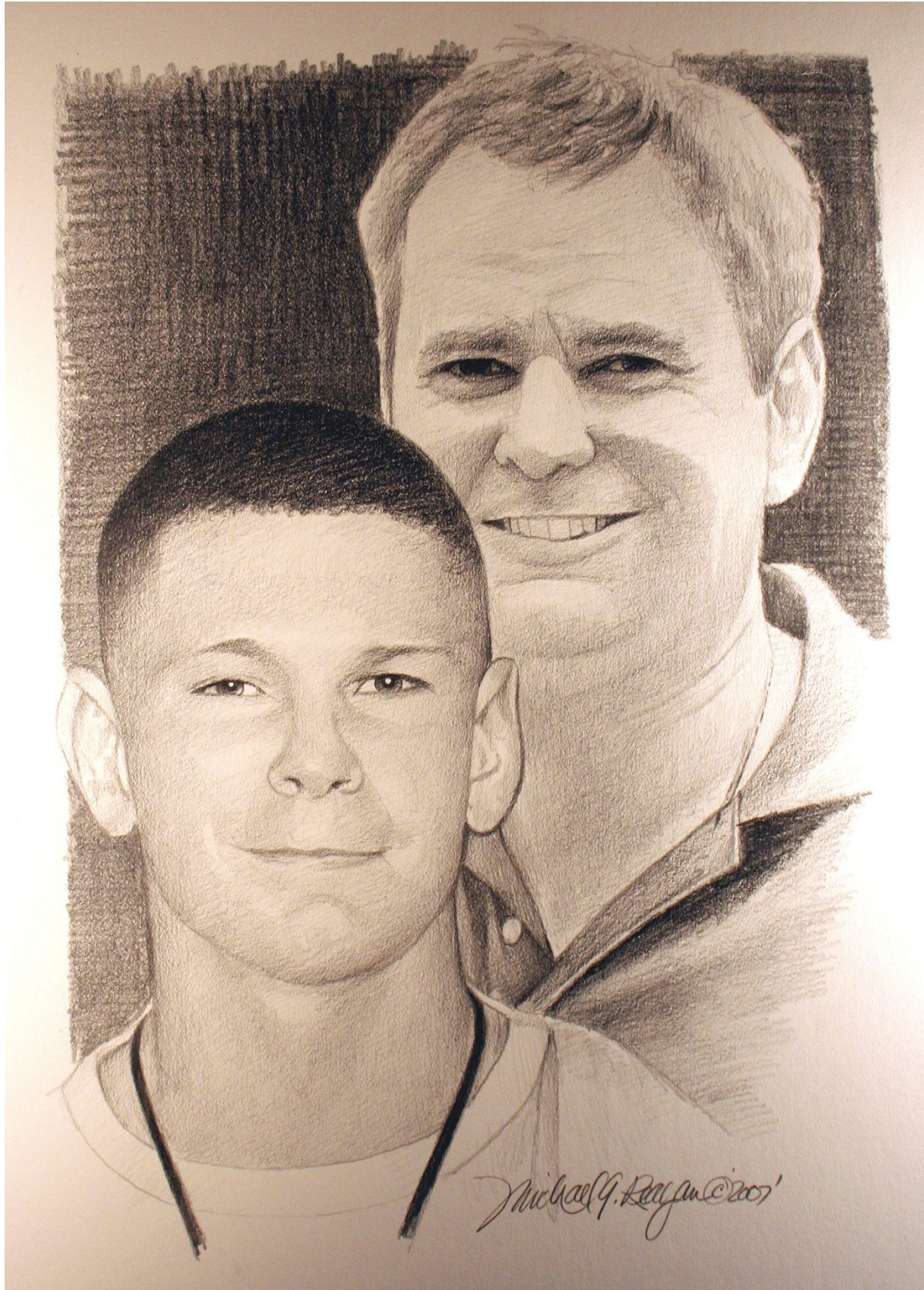
How It All Began

In 2004, NBC did a story on Reagan's charitable portraits of the rich and famous. The story so moved the widow of Navy corpsman Michael Vann Johnson Jr., who died in Iraq in 2003, that she called Reagan and asked how much he would charge for a portrait of her late husband. He refused any payment.

After the Gold Star widow, Charisse Johnson, received the portrait, she called Reagan and told him it was the first time she slept all night in a year. Reagan was so moved, he recalls, that "I told my wife we need to do them all."

As word got out among families, Reagan began receiving photos and videos of fallen loved ones. He chooses whom to draw in a day by listening to his gut.

"I look at the pictures and let them talk to me and they do," he says. "I can't explain why and when they go home and when they say, 'It's my turn.' There is a message this soldier is trying to send home to his family, and for some reason I am the person who will send it home."



Eric Herzberg and his dad

COURTESY OF ERIC HERZBERG

Eric Herzberg, a former army officer whose son Eric, a Marine who was killed by a sniper's bullet in Iraq in 2006, was amazed by the healing he felt coming from his son's portrait. And that he felt his son was sending him a message.

"I know a lot of people who feel the same way," says Herzberg, of Manassas, Virginia. "I was struck by how alive he was in the portrait, it was far different than a photograph."

Determined and Dedicated

Reagan, now retired from the University of Washington, draws about two portraits a day, oftentimes settling into his home studio by 3 a.m. and spending at least the next 10 hours or more on the job. Says Reagan: "I sit here for all those hours for nothing other than the fact that this human being died for me, and he didn't know me."

The process is emotionally wrenching, so after each drawing session Reagan walks 5 ½ miles to heal.

"I try to walk myself out of a broken heart," he says, "so the next day I can draw another one and break my heart all over again."



COURTESY MICHAEL REAGAN

Despite this heartache, Reagan is thrilled that he's been able to help. So are the loved ones of fallen service members.

"I think he's incredible," says Herzberg. "There are a couple people you run into in your life and look at them and say, 'that is somebody who I wish I was more like.' The way Mike goes about doing what he is doing is amazing to me."

Adds Schrock: "Mike is a gentle soul and using the gifts God gave him in a way that is touching our hearts."