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Light in the Dark

By Kelly Puente, Staff Writer

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Sgt. Maj. Jesse Acosta, a Santa Fe Springs resident, has been attending the Blind Veterans Training Program in West Los Angeles. (Diandra Jay/Staff Photographer)

Audio Slideshow: [Blind Soldier Sgt. Maj. Jesse Acosta](#)

LOS ANGELES - With his trusty guide dog Charley at his side, Sgt. Maj. Jesse Acosta sits down at the computer and begins to check his e-mail.

He moves the mouse in Microsoft Outlook until the computer voice shouts "Inbox!" He then clicks the mouse, and the computer reads his latest e-mail.

"Since I've been blind, I've learned that anything and everything is possible," Acosta says.

Acosta, a sergeant major in the Army Reserve, was blinded while fighting in Iraq on Jan. 16, 2006.

Now, nearly three years later, the 51-year-old father of four is learning how to navigate through darkness.

Each morning at 6 a.m., he travels up to two hours by bus from his home in Santa Fe Springs to a school for the blind in West Los Angeles.

With Charley, a 3-year-old German Shepherd, Acosta has reached new levels of speed.

"I tell people they better watch out because we'll part the sea," he says. "We fly."

Acosta is learning e-mail, spreadsheets and Microsoft Excel through the Blind Veterans Training Program at Junior Blind of America.

The program serves about 25 veterans a year, but most are from previous wars and have become blind from various ailments. Acosta is the only Iraq vet.

Through the program, Acosta has become close friends with Carlos Galvan, a 59-year-old

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Vietnam vet who went blind 7 years ago after complications from diabetes. The diabetes, Galvan says, stemmed from exposure to the chemical Agent Orange.

Before he met Acosta, Galvan says, he was beginning to retreat into his home. He's now attending the blind school regularly and is thinking about getting a guide dog.

"It's kind of a downer when every step you take is a



Acosta, 51, right, with his guide dog, Charley, speaks with Sgt. Christopher Herrera of the 376th Personnel Battalion. The father of four, who lost his eyesight in the Iraq war when he was hit with mortar rounds, visits the troops twice a month to provide guidance and support. (Diandra Jav/Staff Photographer)

challenge," Galvan says. "(Acosta) was a great inspiration to me."

The Vietnam vets are the true heroes, Acosta says.

"All those who served in Vietnam kept me alive,"

he says. "They showed me how to be a soldier."

Acosta joined the Army after high school in 1975 and has been re-enlisting in the Army Reserve ever since. He was on inactive reserve and close to retirement when he was sent to Iraq in June 2005.

"They pulled me from the bottom of the barrel," he says.

Stationed at Camp Anaconda near Balad, Acosta, then a first sergeant, and his troops were on a training run on Martin Luther King Day when they were hit by mortar rounds.

Shrapnel ripped through his eyes, hit the front lobe of his brain and severed the nerve controlling his taste and smell.

"Thank God I was the only one seriously hurt," he says.

He woke up at a hospital in Germany and was later transferred to a VA hospital in Palo Alto, where he says he was rushed through rehabilitation before he had a chance to heal.

Still reeling from his brain injury, Acosta said he didn't get the treatment he needed at Palo Alto.

"I had to advocate for my own surgeries," he says.

Acosta was eventually treated at the Naval Medical Center in San Diego, where he underwent seven surgeries.

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He also had trouble finding a VA hospital that provided the right treatment, but the Long Beach VA hospital, which Acosta visits once a week, "picked up the ball."

Acosta has no regrets about his service, but believes many injured soldiers are forgotten once they return home.

"The only regrets I have is how I was treated when I came back," he says. "They weren't ready for the younger generation. That's how they failed us."

It's been a long transition for the tough, East Los Angeles-

born soldier who enjoyed working on cars, lifting weights and riding Harleys.

The transition has also been difficult for his wife of more than 30 years, Connie, and their four children, ages 7 to 33.

"It's hard," he says. "There's a lot of barriers."

Acosta is still on active duty, in charge of the 376th Personnel Battalion. He speaks with his troops about personal issues and post-traumatic stress disorder twice a month at a center in Long Beach.

An employee with Southern California Gas Company for more than 20 years, Acosta is now learning computer programs like Excel so he can work in data analysis.

He's eager to get back to work.

"Why? Because now I'm blind," Acosta says. "And I want to show the community out there that this ain't gonna stop me."

Acosta has asked for veterans who need help to contact him at Junior Blind, at 323-295-4555 or www.juniorblind.org.

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