Cabrillo teacher links poetry, Iraq War

Sullivan publishes book ‘Every Seed of the Pomegranate’

By ROMAIN FONSEGRIVES

SANTA CRUZ — “Every seed of the Pomegranate must be eaten, because you can’t tell which one comes from Paradise.”

When Cabrillo College teacher David Sullivan read the translation of this Arabic saying, he said you have to take in all of life’s experiences: sorrows and pains, as well as joys and pleasures.

Cpl. Angel Millan III came to the same conclusion, only it was after the dust of his duty tours in Iraq finally settled.

“I’m a different person now than I was two years ago,” said Millan, who served in the Marine Corps during Operation Iraqi Freedom from June 2004 to March 2005. “Back then, I had a lot of anger in me.”

Sullivan published his second poetry book last week. With “Every Seed of the Pomegranate,” the Santa Cruz resident battles with words in the aftermath of the Iraq War. Through a series of poems, the local author lends his voice to the American and Iraqi soldiers, along with civilians, bogged down in the sands of the conflict.

“I didn’t attempt to get the whole picture,” Sullivan said. “I was trying to capture and render small windows of that reality.”

Millan and Sullivan met at Cabrillo College in 2010. A literature and film teacher for 14 years at the school, Sullivan has educated many veterans of the Afghan and Iraq wars for the past few years, he said. This position triggered questions from Sullivan, leading him to educate himself on the conflict unfolding in Iraq.

Cabrillo instructor David Sullivan published his second book of poems using multiple voices and dealing with the Iraq War. Cabrillo student and Iraq War vet Angel Millan is named in one of the poems.

The teacher said he was also concerned with the post traumatic stress disorder many of his veteran students were struggling with, he said. Once the vets came home to Santa Cruz, many were feeling shunned from the community.

“That’s the worst wounds of all: the ones you can’t see,” Millan said.

Millan lost close friends in Iraq, he said. He still recalls being considered a hero in New York after his return, before encountering the opposite reaction in Santa Cruz.

“I came back here and all of the sudden I was a murderer,” Millan said.

They were asked to bury what they went through, but not talking about it is like planting bombs in the community,” Sullivan said. “It’s culturally damaging. If we’re going to put people in harm’s way, we need to listen to them all the way through.”

So he listened. He sat down with veterans, read books such as reporter Mark Kukis’ “Voices from Iraq,” in which he interviews Iraqis about the war, and asked for help from U.S. Iraqis.

Sullivan’s inspiration came from many different sources, he said.

With three years of writing under his belt, Sullivan completed a 100-page compilation of poems, entwining Iraqi and U.S. voices. “The Black Camel,” the central poem, features the sorrow of a U.S. corporal and a member of the Iraqi Republican Guard, both dealing with death. “Hope it opens up dialogues and doesn’t shut them down,” Sullivan said.

Millan was profoundly moved by Sullivan’s initiative — one of the poems bears his name because it brought him to tears.

“They say that music tames the beast,” Millan said. “Well in the same way, poetry calms everything down.”

Although the student and his teacher have different political opinions on the war, Millan said he is appreciative of Sullivan’s effort, he said. He said he hopes the book can entice civilians to integrate veterans back into their community.

“There’s nothing that can give anybody the feeling of combat, but it gives an insight,” Millan said. “Veterans should read it, too, it’s important they know that they’re not alone.”