

Jorge Medina, father of soldier killed in Iraq, speaks to the WSWS

“Thousands of soldiers are dying and they don’t care”

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Jorge Medina is one of the thousands of parents who have paid the almost unthinkable price of losing a child in the illegal US war and occupation of Iraq. On November 14, 2003, Army Specialist Irving Medina, 22, was killed in Baghdad when his convoy drove over an improvised explosive device.

Irving’s identical twin brother Ivan had just returned from an 11-month deployment with the Army in Iraq, and their sister Jenny, a sergeant in the Army Reserves, was stationed in Florida when the news of Irving’s death came.

Jorge and Ivan Medina have since become outspoken opponents of the war, joining in marches and protests and making appearances at schools and on television to indict the Bush administration for dragging the country into war based on lies. Last September, Jorge took his protest to floor of the Republican National Convention in New York.

The Medinas learned of Irving’s death late in the afternoon on the same day he was killed. Jorge was working on the upstairs apartment of their modest two-story house in Middletown, New York, pulling nails out of the wall with a hammer, when his wife Ana went down to answer the door. Hearing his wife crying and screaming his name, he ran down the stairs to see a uniformed Army officer and a chaplain. Ana, collapsed on the stairs, was shaking and screaming in Spanish, “Tell them to go away, I don’t want to see them here.”

“When I saw this, I couldn’t even think, I just raised the hammer that I still had in my hand up in the air and my first words were ‘Fuck Bush. Fuck your President for this,’” Jorge said. “I went over to embrace Ana, and the officer was backing out of the door because he probably thought I was going to hit him with the hammer. So I approached him and said, ‘Don’t worry, I’m not going to do anything, just please tell me what happened.’ He said ‘Mr. Medina, I’m sorry but I have to inform you that your son Irving passed away this morning.’”

Jorge Medina came to the US from Mexico City in 1985. It was the year of a devastating earthquake, which caused the collapse of the textile factory where he worked. After several fruitless months searching for a job, he decided to cross the border and head for New York, where his brother had lived for more than a year. Jorge worked in a Mexican restaurant, first as a busboy then as a cook, and then went to the fields, picking onions, apples and cherries. His intention was to save some money and return to his wife and three children in Mexico. Instead, he moved his family to the US in 1988.

The Medina children were quite young at the time of their move to the US—Jenny was eight and the boys were only five. Over the next decade, Jorge Medina worked tirelessly at multiple jobs while his children assimilated and began to flourish in their new home in Goshen, New York, not far from the Catskill Mountains.

“When we moved to Goshen, I had three jobs,” Jorge explained. “I was

working in a Walden Books warehouse and in a restaurant at night, and then on the weekends I worked in a different restaurant. I would never see my children. When I left in the morning they were sleeping, and when I got home at night they were in bed—it was very difficult.”

Jorge continued, “But the kids adjusted very fast. Within a few months, Jenny was talking on the phone and I thought, ‘My God—she’s speaking English.’ The boys took more time to learn, but they thrived eventually. Irving became a very good soccer player, and Ivan was a wrestler.”

By the time they were in high school, Jorge’s children were all working and helping out with the family expenses. Jenny, then 20, was the first to express an interest in joining the military to earn money for college.

“I told her that if she wanted to go to college, we could find another way of doing it,” said Jorge. “We could get loans or I could work more or something. But in the end, she decided that the Army was the way to get the money to go to school.”

Jorge continued, “The boys were not interested in that at all. When they got out of high school, they started going to Orange County Community College. Irving started to play soccer for the school. He was good, a really good player. At the time, I was thinking about sending him back to Mexico to play on a professional team, but the problem was he did not have his [immigration] papers and would not have been able to get back into the US. He really wanted to go—he played with such passion.”

Jorge explained how the boys then chose the same path taken by their sister the previous year, deciding to enlist in the military to pay for their education. He approved.

“You know, at that point I was thinking that you can actually learn good things by joining the military and I didn’t see any signs of war,” he said. “I remember my Mom saying ‘Why did you let them join the military?’ and I said ‘We are at peace, it will be okay.’”

In March 2001, their local Army recruiter sent them to Queens to take the entrance exam. While Ivan reaffirmed his decision to join, Irving had a change of heart, deciding he did not want to enter the Army. Jorge Medina supported his son’s decision not to go.

As Ivan left for boot camp, for Irving there began a relentless storm of phone calls, visits and outright harassment by the recruiters, who even dragged him out of college classes and called his friend’s house looking for him. “They were showing up here every day; it was always ‘Where is Irving? Where is Irving?’” Jorge recalled. “One day I even went to the recruitment center to talk to the sergeant and told him to stop pressuring him, that if he didn’t want to go, then he didn’t want to go.”

Irving soon left with his college soccer team to play in Europe for a few weeks, and when he returned he told his father that perhaps joining the military was the right thing to do.

“He came home and said, ‘Dad, I’m going to need the money to pay for college so I will go,’” Jorge explained. “He wanted to be an accountant.

He was studying for that at the community college.”

Irving went to Oklahoma for boot camp in August 2001. On September 11, after the attacks on the World Trade Center, the commanding officers allowed the recruits from New York to call home to their families.

Jorge described his conversation with Irving that day, “I told him that he and his brother might have to go off to war, and I was thinking of Afghanistan right away. He said that was what all of his commanders were saying also.”

None of the Medinas went to Afghanistan, however. Jenny had joined an Army Reserves JAG (Judge Advocate General’s) unit and was stationed in Orlando, Florida. The boys were being prepared, as they would soon discover, for the invasion of Iraq.

“It wasn’t long after September 11 that I was talking to Jenny and she was saying, ‘Dad, I think we’re going after Saddam,’” Jorge explained. “In the military, they knew. I was saying no way, that’s impossible—I don’t think these men are that crazy. There was no way that Saddam had anything to do with the terrorist attacks. Then they sent Ivan to Kuwait. Meanwhile, Bush was saying that they had no plans for war against Iraq, and I was asking, ‘then why are so many troops getting deployed to Kuwait?’”

Irving received his orders to deploy to Iraq in April 2003. Just before leaving, he went home to visit his parents for a couple of days. This would be the last time Jorge would see his son alive.

Jorge described his conversation with Irving during this brief final visit, “Irving was saying, ‘Dad, I don’t want Ivan to be over there, I think that I’m a stronger soldier than him.’ He was basically worried about Ivan and not himself. Then he said to me, ‘Dad, I don’t believe in this.’ I told him that if he doesn’t want to, he should not go. He said that he had to because it was his job and that he had all of his brothers and sisters [other soldiers] over there. He said, ‘Dad, don’t worry, I will come home safe.’”

Grieving is almost always accompanied by anger, but for Jorge Medina this anger was amplified and sustained by his conviction that the Bush administration’s war in Iraq was based entirely on lies.

“I always felt that the reasons for this war were lies—that we went to war because Bush and his people wanted to, not because we needed to,” Jorge stated. “And I never thought we had the right to go and invade a country against the will of almost the entire world. I don’t know how these men can tell anyone to obey the law when they themselves defy it. Since he [Bush] started talking about Saddam and WMDs, I was thinking, ‘he’s lying.’ I always thought, how could Saddam have weapons of mass destruction if we don’t even let them fly planes? Before the war started, the US destroyed his army and controlled almost everything. It didn’t make sense.

“I was wondering why so many people believed Bush, and I came to the conclusion that the media works totally in his favor. So many Americans are so compassionate about the suffering of other people around the world—I remember so many Americans sending help after the earthquake in Mexico City, and now many people are helping the Tsunami victims—but I think that they just follow what they see on TV. Whenever I look at the news I always try to see things from different points of view. I always say that the people who are managing the career of George W. Bush are very smart. They really know how to manipulate the American people.”

The day after Irving was killed, an Army official showed up at the Medina house with the paperwork concerning his death and funeral arrangements. By this point, both Ivan and Jenny had returned home from their bases. The local newspaper was also there, and they began discussing the politics of the war.

“Ivan all of the sudden said, ‘I don’t have any hard feelings for the Iraqi people—the people that are guilty for my brother’s death are those bastards Bush, Rumsfeld and Cheney,’” Jorge recalled. “I said to Ivan, ‘Don’t say that, you can get into a lot of trouble,’ because he was still in

the military, and you are not allowed to say anything like that. He said, ‘I don’t care,’ and they put it into the newspaper.” This was the beginning for both of them of speaking out against the war.

Soon after, in a stark example of the callous indifference to the lives of American soldiers that characterizes the entire Bush administration, the formal condolence letters began to arrive—signed not by hand, but by computer.

“We received a lot of letters after Irving’s death,” Jorge explained. “One from the generals, one from Bush and one from Rumsfeld. I opened the one from Bush and saw that there was no way that he could have signed it because it looked like it was stamped from a computer. And then the one from Rumsfeld—I knew that he didn’t sign it either, you could just tell—so I sent them both back. It made me feel what I always thought, that they just don’t care. They don’t care about the young soldiers or the families. For them, the soldiers who are dying are only numbers. We did not receive a single phone call from anyone in the government. Bush has not gone to a single funeral. That’s how I know they just don’t care. Including the costs of the funeral, my son’s life cost them around \$18,000. That is the value of a life. How can anyone expect me to keep my mouth shut and not say ‘enough of these people’ when you see an illegal war and thousands of soldiers are dying, and they don’t care. And this is why I decided to speak my mind.”

Jorge contacted Fernando Suarez, whose son Jesus, a Marine, was killed in Iraq only several days into the invasion in March 2003. Suarez, also a Mexican immigrant, had become a vocal opponent of the war and the Bush administration, actively campaigning for the withdrawal of US troops. Jorge himself began making appearances in schools and on public radio and gave interviews to newspapers and magazines. Ivan, discharged from the Army, joined the Iraq Veterans Against War (IVAW) and made an appearance on the “Larry King Live” television program.

Jorge says he often stops if he sees young people talking to military recruiters in malls or on the street. “I tell them not to believe in what they are promising,” he explained. “I tell them that with the promise of benefits and travel, what they are not telling you is that you could be sent off to war to kill and be killed, and I tell them about my son. I try to talk to people everywhere.”

At the Republican National Convention last year in New York, protesters gave Jorge an entrance pass. Wearing a T-shirt with Irving’s picture on it that read “Bush Lied —My Son Died,” he stood up on the convention floor during Gen. Tommy Franks’s endorsement speech and shouted “Bush is a liar! Bush is a liar!” until police escorted him out.

“I think that the American people have to find out more—to educate themselves more,” Jorge concluded. “They have to see how this war is making money for the rich people, and Bush is part of them. We need to make so many changes. When Bush became president, when he was chosen by the Supreme Court, I was saying ‘How could this happen here in this country that is supposed to be a great democracy?’ They put Bush into power because they all wanted this war, and they knew they could push Bush to do it.”



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