

# Author depicts life, death of soldiers in 'Faces of Freedom'

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DAILY NEWS-SUN

Through her words, Valerie Nichols captured glimpses of Michael James Halal and Michelle Witmer for their families, friends and others who didn't know them.

The Sun Citian interviewed loved ones and wrote stories about the military man and woman for a book, "Faces of Freedom," which features military personnel who died in Iraq and Afghanistan. She spoke about her experiences and encounters with their families Monday afternoon in front of a small crowd at Chez Nous Café in Sun City West.

"I felt honored, humbled and grateful that I could be part of their lives for a few months," she said.

Nichols' stories revolve around Witmer, a Wisconsin resident who served in the Nation-



**PETE PALLAGI/DAILY NEWS-SUN**  
Valerie Nichols, contributing author of the book "Faces of Freedom," poses for a photograph prior to speaking at Chez Nous Café Monday in Sun City West.

al Guard, and Halal, a Glendale resident who was a Marine. The book, to which a number of writers contributed, was published a few months ago and features profiles of 50 men and women from each state, as well as Puerto Rico and Washington, D.C.

"It's amazing that I've had the opportunity to tell the stories of heroes who fought and died for the nation," Nichols said.

The Luke Elementary School teacher said she had the chance to be part of "Faces of Freedom," after someone noticed her children's book "Sammy the Sparrow" at an air show. It focused on a bird that often won flying races, until he lost to an F-16 fighter plane.

"I couldn't believe I was contacted, but I was up for the challenge," she said.

Sun City West resident Cindy Larson, a friend and Luke Elementary School teacher, said Nichols was the perfect person to write the profiles.

"I knew she was right for the job because she's a great writer and has the sensitivity," she said.

Nichols chose two people to feature from the Department of De-

fense's Web site. In late 2006, the Wisconsin native contacted both Witmer and Halal's relatives and friends.

For Nichols, Halal and Witmer's stories were touching and compelling.

Halal dropped out of high school, Nichols said, and wanted to become a Marine. He eventually received his GED and high school diploma after being in the service for years.

"His friend told me that even though he didn't have all of the education that he explained things well to his unit," she said. "(Michael) knew how to explain how a weapon worked and broke it down in the simplest of terms."

Halal died in a vehicle

accident in Afghanistan one night.

Nichols said when she was working on the books, she wrote more than 1,000 soldiers had been killed, but that number has since doubled.

"It's amazing how many have died so far, and that number is growing," she said.

When Nichols wrote her profiles, she made sure to capture both Halal and Witmer's deaths as well as their lives with their units and at home.

"A person's death isn't their life because there is so much more," she said. "It's actually a small part of their lives."

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