

Author shares 2 fallen soldiers' stories in new book

By Alison Stanton

SPECIAL FOR THE REPUBLIC

Although most of us never had the chance to meet Marine Lance Cpl. Michael Halal of Phoenix or Spc. Michelle Marie Witmer of New Berlin, Wis., author Valerie A. Nichols said she hopes readers come away feeling as if they have known the pair all their lives after reading her essays about both in the book *Faces of Freedom*.

Nichols, a Sun City resident and Grade 7 language arts teacher at Glendale's Luke Elementary, was one of 47 authors chosen to write about the lives of men and women from all 50 states, Washington, D.C. and Puerto Rico, who sacrificed their lives fighting in Iraq or Afghanistan.

On Monday, Nichols gave a talk about the book at Chez Nous Center and Café in Sun City West. *The Republic* caught up with her beforehand to ask her about her work on the book, which was released May 19, Armed Forces Day.



JOSHUA S. GARBER

Author Valerie A. Nichols discusses *Faces of Freedom*. Pete and Sue Gruman of Sun City West listen to her presentation.

Question: How did you come to be part of the book?

Answer: "I was at the Experimental Aircraft Association (EAA) in 2005 selling my children's book *Sammy the Sparrow*, which has an F-16 in it. Rebecca Pepin, one of the contributing authors, came over

and spoke with me. I really think this whole thing is called synchronicity and all of that good stuff, because in November of that year, she contacted me and said, 'We are compiling a book with profiles of people who have given their lives for our country. Will you do Ari-

Writing Class for Veterans

Who: Valerie A. Nichols.

What: Teaching a six-week writing course for veterans age 18 or older.

When: 6-7:30 p.m. Wednesdays, Sept. 12, 19, 26 and Oct. 3, 10 and 17.

Where: Goelet A.C. Beuf Community Center, 3435 W. Pinnacle Peak, Phoenix, Room 108.

Cost: \$28

Info: phoenix.gov/PARKS/beufcc.html#senior, click on "Spring Program!" then scroll down to "writing."

Q: Who did you interview? Was it challenging to write about people you had never met?

A: "I interviewed Jacque Mikkelson, Michael's mom. I called her and met with her and interviewed her for a couple of hours. She gave me his scrapbooks — talk about being nervous! I wanted to take good care of them."

Nichols spoke with a friend of Halal's, Sgt. Benjamin Czap.

"For Michelle, I spoke with her twin sister and her parents. I went to New Berlin, Wisconsin, and was invited to their home ... The challenge with this kind of situation is that I didn't use a tape recorder, I just took notes, and then I had to pull it all back and do the writing bit. The people gave me excellent stories and excellent memories."

zona?" I said, 'Yes, but can I do the Wisconsin person too?'"

Nichols said she was allowed to choose who she wanted to profile, and after doing extensive research she decided to write about Halal, 22, and Witmer, 20.

Proceeds from the book go to Fisher House and Wounded Warriors Project.

www.valerieanichols.com