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Around the Columns

His mission continues

Eric Greitens has stellar academic credentials — he’s a Rhodes scholar with a doctorate in politics from Oxford University — but Bart Wechsler, his boss at MU’s Truman School of Public Affairs, still has a tongue-in-cheek gripe about one of his newest faculty members: “He’s just 35 years old, but he makes you feel like an underachiever,” Wechsler says.

Greitens has been a senior fellow at the Truman School since 2008, teaching a graduate-level course on public service, ethics and leadership. That’s just the latest entry in this St. Louis native’s overstuffed resume. While a Duke University undergraduate, he volunteered at refugee camps in Croatia and later did humanitarian work in Rwanda, Cambodia, Bolivia and India. His documentary photographs from those areas have won awards for showing the inner strength people can summon in tragedy (see slideshow below).

Adobe Flash version 8, or higher, and Java Script are required to view the slide show for this feature story.

After graduating from Oxford, Greitens joined the Navy. He was taking underwater demolition training as a Navy SEAL when the twin towers came down on Sept. 11. “We knew then that at the end of our training we would be going to war,” he says. Greitens earned a Purple Heart and a Bronze Star during his four deployments in Iraq, Afghanistan, Africa and Southeast Asia while commanding Special Operations units and an Al Qaeda targeting unit. After leaving the service, he was appointed a White House Fellow during the Bush administration and worked on disaster relief in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina.

Then, a visit to wounded Iraq War comrades at Bethesda Naval Hospital launched Greitens on a new challenge. As he talked with the wounded, he asked what they wanted to do now. “Every one of them said they would like to continue to serve somehow,” he says. “It was really a powerful time for me. I realized that what they had to hear in addition to ‘thank you’ was, ‘We still need you.’ That we saw them not as problems, but as assets.”

So Greitens and several friends pooled their military combat and disability pay and started an organization called The Mission Continues. Now based in St. Louis, it provides \$6,000 fellowships to wounded veterans to prepare themselves for public service work. So far, the 34 recipients are working in fields as varied as pediatric nursing, social work and physical therapy.

Working through MU's Truman School, Greitens is promoting independent leadership and social innovation. The goal is to help community organizations around the state develop innovative projects and then connect them to funding sources that will help get those projects off the ground.

What's the next challenge on Greitens' agenda? He has stopped training for marathons to take up a loftier sport — mountain climbing.

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