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## How one nonprofit campaign is fighting for better storytelling about war veterans



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By Julie Kliegman

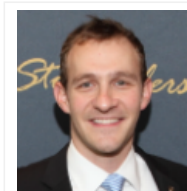
Julie is the weekend editor for [TheWeek.com](#) and a freelance journalist based in New York. She's written for publications including [BuzzFeed](#), [Vox](#), [Mental Floss](#), [Paste](#), the [Tampa Bay Times](#) and [PolitiFact](#). Follow her [@jmkliegman](#).

After completing his second Army tour in Iraq, [Matt Mabe](#) was eager to readjust to civilian life. But when he enrolled in Columbia University's graduate journalism program in 2007, he felt uncomfortable with the expectations many of his civilian classmates seemed to set for him. Mabe didn't see himself as gruff, overly disciplined and intimidating, but he got the sense that, as a veteran, this was the persona his peers thought he'd take on.

"I felt many times like an alien around school because I was coming from a completely different place in American society," Mabe said. "I was coming from this cloistered military environment and faraway experiences that people had only read about in newspapers or seen in movies."

Eight years and an unexpected third tour in Afghanistan later, Mabe took a day job challenging the public perception of war veterans he had come to know. In June, he became the director of impact at [Got Your 6](#), a campaign started in 2012 by the Boston-based nonprofit [Be the Change Inc](#). The campaign hosts storytelling events where veterans speak about the impact they have as civilians, as well as "collaboratories" meant to foster communication between different veterans' groups.

Mabe sees veterans on a bell curve. At one end, some men and women are extraordinarily heroic. At the other, he knows people struggling with post-



Matt Mabe

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traumatic stress disorder and other trauma. In the middle, he says, are veterans like him, people whose stories aren't often told by entertainers and journalists.

That concept is what led Hollywood producer Charlie Ebersol to start **6 Certified**, a committee of veterans, journalists and entertainment executives that recognizes films and TV shows working to normalize depictions of veterans.

"We realized that celebrating and honoring those who accurately portray veterans on film and television, even if they really are humdrum and square — people who go to work, pay their taxes, vote and participate in their communities — will encourage and entice others in the industry to wake up and do the same," Ebersol told ivoh in an email.

Mabe points to *Modern Family*'s Jay Pritchett (Ed O'Neill) as the kind of veteran character they'd like to see more of. Pritchett tells Navy stories from time to time, but we see him primarily as a father, grandfather, pesky in-law, and small business owner.

To avoid bias, **6 Certified** operates independently from the *Got Your 6* staff. Committee members debate the merits of each project with a **checklist** in mind. Hiring a veteran writer, consulting veterans while writing and developing a multidimensional veteran character are all elements that can merit a film or show's approval. Since June, the committee has awarded certifications to 13 projects out of the roughly 70 submitted.

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"The villain of the week on a 1-hour crime procedural who suffers from PTSD and is hurting people — that just seems like the most overdone, clichéd thing I can think of in 2015," Ebersol said. "I'm much more interested in digging into the real veteran experience, especially when it's something that adds dimension and depth to a particular project or story."

Though **6 Certified**, like *Got Your 6* in general, purposely doesn't focus only on the veterans that do come home from war and face **challenges** like PTSD, substance abuse and homelessness, the committee still welcomes those stories — as long as, like in *American Sniper*, the darkness is just one part of a more nuanced character.

In endorsing examples of compassionate, accurate storytelling about veterans, **6 Certified** committee members hope to highlight the depth and diversity of veterans without demanding creative control over the stories writers and producers want to tell. It's a goal that dovetails neatly with **#IAm**, a *Got Your 6* social media campaign that invites veterans to share the characteristics, skills and style that make them unique. The individuals who serve in our military are more than their uniforms, which, Mabe suggested, can make for better narratives.

"(Writers) may be presently surprised to find that as human beings—and all the complexity and drama that comes with it — we might actually make better characters in their scripts than the tired old stereotypes they've been writing for years and years," Mabe said.

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