

## CHAPTER 17

# THE FREEDOM TO NEVER GIVE UP

BY KEVIN HODES

Halftime energy erupted across the sold-out arena as a choir of children sang the national anthem and friends of the military laid roses to honor fallen soldiers. In the stands, dark blue veterans' hats dotted the crowd. At center floor, active servicemen and women stood at attention.

“Good evening, and welcome to Military Appreciation Night!” I began. These words I’d said for more than a dozen annual celebrations now, sponsored by Swypit, benefiting Folds of Honor and The American Fallen Soldiers Project. Tonight, I would also make this national event personal to my life.

Once a year at the Comerica Center in Frisco, Texas, my company, Swypit, leads a massive salute to service members and their families. The Folds of Honor Foundation gives college scholarships to the spouses and children of fallen or disabled military and first responders. The American Fallen Soldiers Project presents portraits to Gold Star families. Where better than at a Texas Legends basketball game with spirits already through the roof?

Twelve years earlier, the president of the Texas Legends, Malcolm Farmer, had asked Swypit to sponsor an event to honor the US military. “That’s an easy yes,” I said to him. Since 9-11, the military had moved to front and center in my regard. But my ‘yes’ depended, I said, on our getting to present portraits to families of fallen soldiers center court at halftime. Mr. Farmer said yes, and we proceeded to do it for many years, most memorably to the family of ‘American Sniper’ Chris Kyle (the first recognition, Chris’ father said, to the entire Kyle family). Just google it, ‘Swypit Chris Kyle’ and see for yourself.

Now from the microphone I wanted to draw a short, straight line from the US military to my life. “When I was eighteen years old,” I began, “and in my first semester of college, training to be a professional chef, I crashed and totaled my car.”

Wait...a car accident? If that seems out of context to a ‘never give up’ military salute, stay with me. Because our military goes into extraordinary circumstances, I can have ordinary problems. Because certain men and women follow orders, the rest of us are free to follow our dreams.

Without a car, I told the crowd, I had no way to get to my college classes or to the four jobs I worked to pay for them. Dad was a blue-collar guy. At my age, he’d joined the Navy. Now as I sat in his living room, his advice was for me to “pick a branch and sign up.”

But I’m building a career, I pleaded with Dad. I wanted to be a chef—to work in food service in all its varieties, and I was good at it. The instructors in my major at SUNY Sullivan were also top chefs at the world-renowned Culinary Institute of America.

Dad heard me that day, and he moved us to Plan B. He worked multiple jobs to make ends meet for himself and his family. Now he’d help me scrounge together \$700 to pay for another car and finish college.

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My mother and father divorced before I was old enough to have memories of ever seeing them in the same room. When they remarried to other people, my Jewish father's new wife was a Catholic who converted to Judaism, and they lived in Brooklyn. My Jewish mother married a Southern Baptist, converted to Christianity, and moved with him to Kansas City, with me in tow.

My stepfather was a mechanic for TWA, enabling me to fly often to see my father and his new bride, another thing I look back on with gratitude. On one of those stays with Dad—I must have been 11 or 12 years old—before dinner I said grace, thanking Jesus.

Right, Jesus.

“Where'd you get all that?” my dad asked.

“At Bible study,” I said, adding that at my rural Kansas City home we regularly said grace.

That's all it took. I returned to Mom's house to find my things packed for an almost immediate U-turn back to Dad. The rush from rural Missouri to upstate New York may sound abrupt, and at the time I may have thought it was, but the move saved me. What Dad didn't know—and I didn't know to say—was that I was in the crosshairs of a sexual predator in the neighborhood. I would be grown, with children of my own, before I fully grasped the situation I was leaving.

But in my life, every 'crisis' has somehow also brought good. After their divorce, my parents moved states apart, for instance, but my place in their hearts went nowhere. Maybe it was my young age when they split, but instead of dividing my happiness, it doubled it. I grew up with two birthdays, two sets of holidays,

two kinds of families exposing me to two worlds—far more than anything my friends had. “It must have been a pain for you,” I’ve said to my parents, “shuttling me back and forth, weaving me in and out your plans. But it made me the man I am today, and I am eternally grateful.”

Those years of adapting to two sets of circumstances did something else. They made me a hustler. By that I mean, in whatever situation I found myself, I hustled to fix it, improve it, or in some way supercharge it. My reflex is still to take anything I can to the next level.

When SUNY Sullivan handed me my degree, I was hired by Great Gorge Mountain View Resort—the old Playboy Club, in McAfee, New Jersey. My new salary helped me buy a Pontiac Grand Am, and the work was great until a fellow employee introduced me to drugs, grooming me to become a dealer too.

When the resort hotel closed suddenly, like my father whooshing me to New York, I was again pulled from a bad situation. This time instead of living with Dad, with my car and the shirt on my back, I collected unemployment and couch surfed/slept in my car in Jersey for a stint. Then I moved to my sister’s couch in Brooklyn and a job at Pizza Hut. Next, with a \$400/month apartment in the worst part of town, I was a full-time Pizza Hut assistant manager and part-time chef for World Yacht, cruising up and down the East River.

One day I was standing on West 23rd St. in front of a supermarket, still in my World Yacht chef’s uniform, when a man introduced himself.

“I’m Francis,” he said. “You a chef?”

“How can you tell?” I said with a chuckle.

“You at World Yacht?” he asked now. Francis worked on one

of the mega-yachts that docked next to World Yacht. This time, when I said yes, his simple response forever changed my life.

“Come work with me,” he said. “Let’s see how you do.”

By now I’d left Pizza Hut to be assistant food-service director at Chapin, a famous private school on Manhattan’s Upper East Side, whose all-girls student body then included Ivanka Trump. Through Francis, my first private-yacht cooking position was on one owned by Al Copeland of Popeye’s Famous Fried Chicken and Copeland’s Restaurants. There were others; and there would be a ride down the inter-coastal with Francis in a boat we docked and converted into a restaurant for the casino traffic in Mississippi. “Just remember you can always come home,” my father said when I left for that trip, blessing me with the freedom to take risk.

About that time, my neighbor was trying to draw me into serious crime. This time I was rescued by leaving for a new chapter in food service, this time working on private yachts from Mississippi to Atlantic City, Florida, Maine, and Connecticut. Later worksites on land ranged from CNBC to a nuclear power plant. The final yacht I worked on—owned by the family of the original distributors of Coca Cola—led to meeting my wife, Sarah.

I proposed to Sarah on yet another private yacht I had worked on, the Mariner III. At my request, it was in front of the Statue of Liberty that I popped the question.

That was more than 25 years ago. Early marriage landed Sarah and me in Colorado in work that had me talking to business owners, which led to credit card processing. A friend in the business got me to Dallas, where I eventually opened my own business. What a ride. The world of credit-card processing is ripe for corruption. I work hard to infuse my business with honesty and integrity, which brings us back to the US Armed Forces.

My devotion to the military started not with Dad—though his navy years matter—but with my cousin Robert Hess, a fireman with Ladder Company 76. The Twin Towers were hit on his day off, and most of his unit perished. The next day, every fireman in the city showed up; Robert would be one of the first of them, years later, to die of the cancer that plagues those who served at Ground Zero. My Uncle Richie was there on 9-12 as well. He also died of related cancer.

Except for comedian Jon Stewart, who testified at Senate hearings, few prominent voices have sounded for the 9-11 heroes and their families. But I want to, and the reason for that is a mix of civilian opportunities gained and military lives lost. Since Swypit began Military Appreciation Night, I know hundreds of the personal stories of sacrifice among our first responders, our military, and the families behind them.

Many good programs exist to say thank you, and I urge you to serve through them—though any program should be vetted first. I choose to serve through the American Fallen Soldiers Project, helping families of fallen soldiers with comfort and healing and Folds of Honor with the gift of college educations.

Our men and women in uniform and their families embody the American spirit of ‘Never Give Up.’ Swypit is privileged to help acknowledge that. Year after year I tell my story, and year after year my words are a drop of water in what should be an ocean of gratitude because, “My Freedom Isn’t Free.”

**Thank God for the men and women who never, never give up.**



## About Kevin

Since 1999, owner and founder of Swypit, Kevin Hodes, prides himself on bringing honesty and integrity to the world of credit card processing. Swypit provides much more than just a service. Swypit takes great pride in assisting their clients with growing and managing their business, while directly and successfully contributing to their client's profitability. His expertise in the merchant service industry is sought out and he has been seen on ABC, NBC, CBS, A&E, E! and Bravo networks.

In an industry that is rife with third party providers who are often more intent upon selling equipment than providing an effective solution for your business, Swypit ensures that their clients feel like more than just a number and receive an unparalleled level of communication and customer support.

Swypit provides world-class service, rates, and leading edge technology. In addition, they offer businesses free credit card terminals, assistance with point-of-sale systems capable of managing inventory, payroll, gift cards, as well as cash advance services. They also offer surcharging with no-cost credit card processing.

Kevin Hodes is a four-time Best-Selling Author and Executive Producer of the following documentaries:

- *Maximum Achievement: The Brian Tracy Story* — 2017
- *The Jay Abraham Story: Getting Everything You Can Out Of All You've Got* — 2018
- *The Truth About Reading* — 2021
- *Dickie V* — 2022
- *It's Happening Right Here* — 2022
- *Tactical Empathy* — 2022
- *Folds of Honor: A Fighter Pilot's Mission to Deliver Healing and Hope to America* — 2020

Kevin has received numerous Telly awards and the *Folds of Honor* documentary received two Emmys.

Staying active in the community and giving back is important to Kevin, which is why direct profits from Swypit go back into many community organizations, with his primary focus being 'The American Fallen Soldiers Project' and 'The Folds of Honor.'