

A Set of Rules, by KJ Sanchez:

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- No politics. Right off the bat, we told all our subjects that this play was not about the politics of the war, but rather about what it's like to come home. This was a relief to many, since most defined themselves as apolitical, explaining to us that they must be able to serve as "the arm of the people," no matter who is commander-in-chief.
- Don't say things like, "I don't support the war, but I support the troops." I struggled with this for a long time, but I finally understood why: If someone wanted to start a relationship with me and one of their first comments was, "I think theatre is irrelevant and a waste of time, but I think it's neat that you're a theatre director," that would certainly *not* encourage me to welcome them into my home and my life.
- Take the time to learn a little of their language and a few key rules. Don't call a sailor or a marine a soldier (that's army) or if you're talking to someone enlisted, i.e., not an officer, don't call them *sir* or *ma'am*, call them by their rank: staff sergeant or sergeant major. It took a little study, but one afternoon of research proved invaluable in establishing trust and respect.
- Thanking someone for their service may not be as welcome as you might think—many shared with us their conflicted feelings about that sentiment. Responses ranged from benign—as a female army officer told me, "I guess I feel guilty when people thank me, since I didn't see the worst"—to more emotional. A staff sergeant who was severely injured in an IED attack responded: "Thank you for what? For getting blown up? For being in the wrong place at the wrong time? Or for doing what you wouldn't go and do? Whatever, just buy me a beer and we'll call it even." (I break this rule all the time; I still thank them for their service. I just make sure that I know something about them as people before I thank the uniform.)
- America does not have a warrior culture. If you get this, and let them know that you get this, it will be one of the most important keys to opening gates to this community. As a commanding officer told a room full of marine parents at a conference we attended: "Believing America possesses a warrior culture reflects more wishful thinking than reality. Much has been said about Americans being desensitized to violence, via Hollywood and video games. But there is no correlation between watching two-dimensional, thirdparty violence and having the faculties to face and kill an armed opponent, while doing so inside the intensity of fear for one's own life. Our alleged comfort with interpersonal violence is an illusion." Hearing this coming from an infantry commander helped me understand the disconnect between my assumptions and his reality.