

**The pioneers of a warless world
are the youth that refuse military
service.**

—Albert Einstein

10

You have other choices

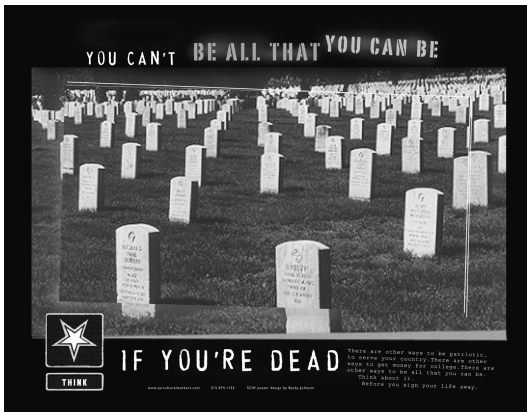
Rae Aibileah,
with research assistance
from Jen Low

Rae Aibileah is an activist, writer, and artist who considered joining the military after high school to secure much-needed funds for a college education. Rae has been active in the movement to counter military recruiters on college and high school campuses and to foster a stronger youth antiwar movement. She currently works for Code Pink: Women for Peace as the national local groups coordinator, helping to strengthen the grassroots peace movement in the United States and abroad.

When I was five years old, I made up my mind to become an astronaut. At eight, the dream had shifted to architecture. By the time I reached thirteen, my

latest plan for success involved medical school—a chance to heal the sick. These aspirations came to a halt when my mother’s bruised and battered relationship with my alcoholic father finally erupted, after years of her trying to hold it together. My parents’ divorce ravaged not only our emotional reserves, but left all our bank accounts empty in its wake. Money that had been destined for my college tuition went into paying astronomical legal fees, and college no longer seemed like a realistic option for me. The only way to a college degree appeared to be through the military, which advertised tens of thousands of dollars for school.

The ad that tempted me to join depicted a large ship and a strong, muscular man standing next to a petite woman. The caption read something like, “This Coast Guard cadet just returned from a successful mission. (Her boyfriend just showed up to bring her lunch.)” Of course, the viewer assumed that the man was in the Coast Guard, and the surprise twist made joining the military sound like a promise to shatter the glass ceiling, erasing the pretty-and-helpless-girl stereotype associated with teenage female identity. In addition to getting



Counter-recruitment poster by Becky Johnson/
SCW, www.syculturalworks.com

money for college, I wanted to be this strong, independent woman. I was furious that my high school didn't have a Junior ROTC program that would jumpstart my military career.

In the meantime, I packed my schedule full of good classes, played sports after school, and volunteered at a soup kitchen. I took a peer counseling class and I started facilitating domestic violence prevention workshops, feeling stronger as a survivor of abuse. I felt empowered to make change in the world, even if I was only affecting one or two people at a time. The change in my thinking was gradual, of course, but if there is one thing that is sure to deter someone from joining the military, it is feeling confident to reach for your highest dreams without needing the kind of discipline the armed forces offer: harsh orders, violence, and power through physical prowess rather than mediation and dialogue.

When I started my senior year of high school, I decided that even though I grew up in a small town and didn't know what kind of competition I was up against, I would apply to college. If I didn't get in, then I would revisit the option of the military,

mostly as a back door into university. I must've applied for dozens of scholarships and to at least fourteen colleges. Filling out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form was challenging, particularly because I had no contact with my father and could not supply his information. But with a little help, I finished it and sent it in. Finally, that spring my efforts were rewarded when I received some merit-based scholarships and a large financial aid package based on my financial need to attend Barnard College, an all-women's school in New York City, my dream destination.

While I was in college, I continued to apply for scholarships and aid money. I worked in the financial aid office—a great way to get to know the people who made key decisions about my financial aid package. I applied for loans and grants and kept on working. Throughout college, as I learned more about the way that the United States has repeatedly invaded other countries using military force in the name of democracy and freedom, joining the military began to look less valiant and honorable. In the wake of 9/11, as I watched my brothers and sisters deployed to fight

in Afghanistan for what I believed to be an immature and retaliatory response to terrorism, I was relieved that I had not chosen the military path. I became more ardently dedicated toward working for peace, the kind of peace that doesn't come to us via gunpoint or large sums of money. I now work full-time for an organization—Code Pink: Women for Peace—that seeks to end the war in Iraq and bring the troops home now.

I am not writing this down as a “chicken soup for the soul” kind of success story. What I want to highlight is that I did not join the Army because I realized that I had choices and that joining the military was not the only way to go to college or become a strong woman. And at that time, I didn't even know that, according to the Central Committee for Conscientious Objectors, 60 percent of all recruits never receive any money for college.

I meet people my age all the time these days who, after seriously considering joining the military, are making other decisions, which often involve working for social change in their communities. And if I had joined the Army, I may not be alive today to do the peace work that I am doing

and to celebrate the world that we are working so hard to save.

Many people are deciding not to join the military, especially for some of the excellent reasons listed in this book. It's a matter of seeing beyond the hype. The military is promising the American Dream: money, college education, travel, adventure, the good life, security and discipline, fraternity and membership into an exclusive group. But, they are delivering a nightmare: death, loss of limbs, broken minds and bodies. Recognizing the flip side of the military coin is the first step; finding other ways to pursue the good life is the natural second.

In our society, an education is a ticket to a stable and sustainable career. Given the state of the economy at the moment, it is unsurprising that 33 percent of male recruits and 39 percent of female recruits report that they enter the military to get money for college.¹ Unfortunately, the military is

1. Cohen, William. *Annual Report to the President and the Congress*. Washington, D.C., 2000.

often so desperate to meet quotas and is itself so strapped for cash that these are empty promises; most recruits never see any of this money. Rather than take a gamble on a lot of hot air from military recruiters, it's possible to find tuition money from a reputable source. According to Paul Wrubel, founder of the College Company in San Mateo, California, a cumulative \$102 billion is available annually in federal financial aid money alone. Students who qualify are eligible for loans from the federal government, like subsidized and unsubsidized Stafford loans, as well as Perkins loans. (Unfortunately, the Bush administration and Republican-controlled Congress have cut some student aid programs.)

Although little federal funding goes unclaimed, often youth miss out on thousands of dollars in private scholarships simply because they are not aware of them. It doesn't take an honor student or a top-notch athlete to receive these scholarships; many are need-based or just require a bit of focus when thinking about academic goals.

The military advertises job-training programs with instruction in the latest technology, but the truth is that many of the skills Army personnel

learn are not applicable in civilian life. More and more people are seeing that military skills are a niche that doesn't really have much of a market, so they are wisely opting for job apprenticeship programs instead. After all, Hummer repair might cull a few job offers outside the military, but general metalworking skills will beef up a resume far more effectively. Often, financial aid is available for training when the field of interest is in high demand. "Many young people are opting to go to trade schools to become skilled in computer science, collision repair, or other labor jobs instead of fighting in this war," said Jackie Alvarez, a program officer at Homies Unidos, a Los Angeles-based organization that works to counter gang violence.

For some, the military promises direction. After high school, it is often difficult to decide on a career path, and this can be frightening for young graduates. But hardly any of the twenty-somethings these days have found their life's calling, even after college. Sometimes a good education, coupled with the simple act of getting one's feet wet in a different job, can be the best tool in deciding on a vocation. When Aimee Allison, a conscientious

objector from the Gulf War and a GI Rights counselor (and author of chapter 7), is asked about what to say to youth who are uneasy about their futures and eager to join the military, she advises: “What’s the rush? The military will be there in a month or two. But let’s consider all the ways you can realize your dreams.” Once we take the pressure off and open up the conversation about other possibilities, Allison explained, “young people feel more hopeful about their future and the military doesn’t look all that good.” After a grueling four years in high school, many young people are understandably not eager to attend college, but this doesn’t mean they have to hop into the military in lieu of finding a “real job.” Some spend time working or earning money through traveling. Programs such as the Ameri-corps Education Award allow youth to serve around the country and earn up to \$4,725 for college money for a full year of service. Another project of Americorps, City Year, encourages youth from ages seventeen to twenty-four to serve in communities to build networks locally and globally. In addition, there are many international

organizations that offer subsidized internships, such as teaching English in Japan or volunteering to work with AIDS patients in Africa. Although these programs may not offer money for college, they provide youth the opportunity to travel and be immersed in different cultures—some of the best stuff a fulfilling life, and a good resume, has to offer.

There is a great sense of pride in American culture about serving our country through the armed services—or at least there's a lot of media hype and seductive advertising about it. Though not as visibly glamorous, it takes more honor and courage to dedicate one's life to working for social change. Teachers, community organizers, activists, engineers, public defense attorneys, lobbyists, and artists are the true patriots, the ones who are working to make their country better by countering societal woes—war, poverty, hunger, sickness, and neighborhood violence, to name a few.

Young folks who grow up in low-income areas or troubled households might be attracted to the

discipline and strength promised by the military, as a direct contrast to the disorder and loss of control they feel at home. Additionally, the institutionalized violence that the military represents seems to provide a socially acceptable use of street survival skills that might otherwise land a person in jail. When a young person is failing out of school, taking drugs, or experiencing family violence at home, he or she likely feels weak.

“The offer of physical prowess and the power commanded by wearing the Army uniform can become very enticing, beyond the financial incentives offered by the military,” suggests Galen Petersen, musician and co-founder of Art in Action, an arts and activism summer camp for underprivileged youth. “But young people are finding these same three qualities—discipline, respect, and strength—through art. . . . In order to put out an effective product, like a CD, a break-dance routine, or a mural, you need to be focused and disciplined. And when you have something to offer to people in your community, you gain respect.”

Galen works with youth interested in rapping their stories and making music in Oakland, Califor-

nia. He tells the young people he works with that real strength comes from believing in your own voice and what you have to say. After all, it takes a lot of strength to keep on making art in the face of people who say that you'll never succeed and that it's not good enough. Galen echoed this sentiment when he said, "You have to be strong to not cower in fear of being rejected, to speak your truth."

Adonis (A-1) Walker is one such young person who is resisting the military by creating art. "I'm not going to join the Army," he told me after his solo hip-hop performance at a recent conference about the environment and war. "I mean, there's a war in our neighborhoods that we have to fight before we fight elsewhere. Music is my alternative; I want the world to hear me and what I have to say."

Adonis is a bright, resilient seventeen-year-old with a great sense of humor and a gunshot scar. "Killing doesn't get you anywhere [and] going to the Army is not going to solve anyone's problems," he said. "Get your GED and go to a community college. You don't have to put your life in danger to get an education."

Each of us has choices about what to eat, who to love, who to befriend, who to admire, which sports to play, and which electives to take in school. Ultimately you are the only person who controls your future, even when parents, teachers, government, the cops, and military recruiters tell you otherwise. And you have choices.

I think of all the birthday parties, the report cards, the hot lunches, the dirty socks, the packages of Band-Aids, the haircuts, the crushes, and all the firsts—first dance, first home run, first love, first roller coaster ride—that go into growing a life. Lately, every time I hear about another death in Iraq, all these images flash in my mind. They inevitably end in the same question Cindy Sheehan is asking President Bush, “For what noble cause?”

As I finish writing this chapter, another soldier has just died. His name is John R. Stalvey, a Marine from Conroe, Texas. He was twenty-two years old. For all those that have died so young, I think of how they will never have another memory—not another birthday, not another smile, not another kiss, not another chance. Everything becomes the last.

I am twenty-three, just one year older than John

R. Stalvey was when his life ended. I am scattering these stories about real alternatives into a society that feeds youth guns, TV, cheap fast food, and even cheaper education. I am planting seeds of hope in terrain that has been declared unfit for the cultivation of peace. Maybe a sentence or two of this writing will fertilize a blossoming mind and sprout the idea that when there is no way out, it is not the time to give in to this child-killing machine called the military; it's time to resist.