In a dark hospital station in Abu Ghraib prison in 2004, doctors and nurses struggle to keep up with the mass casualties from an attack on the detainee's lunch room.

All around, physicians and assistants handle the stress from the operation room differently – some sweat, others appear teary eyed. But Riley Sharbonno, an American nurse, saves the emotion for later – he takes a picture.

There's a picture for every moment – one of the road from Fallujah, one of the prison, one of a fellow soldier. There are hundreds of pictures from Sharbonno's one-year service as an registered nurse in Iraq. But how does one display, filter or observe such art? That's where Monica Haller, a 29-year-old teacher and artist, comes in.

"The book is a collaboration I did with Riley," Haller said at a visit on Tuesday with Paly beginning journalism students, describing the 500-page novel Riley and his Story she created using Sharbonno's pictures. "In 2005, I contacted Riley...and learned he had a very special connection to these photos."

Haller had previously met Sharbonno at the College of St. Benedict in Minnesota, where both attended college.

Immediately after viewing his pictures, Haller knew that his story had to be published.

"I wanted to find a way to mobilize his voice," Haller said.

It was not the pictures themselves, however, that interested her the most. It was the method of photography.

"The camera in combat was operating like a prosthetic device, like an extension of his body," Haller said.

The extra limb, she says, functions by "just taking a picture, then saving it for later."

"Saving [the stress] for later," however, proved just as difficult for Sharbonno as feeling the emotion at its birth.

"He hadn't looked at his images, and he didn't want to," Haller said.
"I see pictures that I can't remember at all," Sharbonno says in the novel. "But I know the pictures are from my camera. I wonder again if this really happened at all."

To best achieve the viewer's understanding of Sharbonno's response through his photos, Haller played with several different media.

"I tried putting it in a gallery," she said, "but I didn't like it. I tried embedding and projecting it in 3D. I didn't like that, either."

She soon realized that a gallery type viewing experience would not work.

"It's not about the single image," Haller said.

Haller understood that a novel would be the best presentation of Sharbonno's pictures, due to its dynamic nature.

"The beginning step was to organize and edit out pictures," Haller said. "The pacing was very important to me. I wanted there to be a time to each page."

Haller said that she knew she achieved this intuitive pacing when Sharbonno first read the novel. Haller recalls Sharbonno saying, "I read something and I think this picture should be next, and it's there!"

Despite her involvement in the project, however, Haller said, "I am not a war artist." Instead, Haller "mobilizes the voice" of war, "deploys" that image, and spreads it by allowing it to "infiltrate the American audience." In that manner, she believes she shows readers that "the experience [of war]...is much more complicated than a one-line answer."

Monica Haller's *Riley and His Story* is available for preorder from Amazon books for $31 (ISBN 2915359385).

*Editor's note: Sharbonno served for one year in Iraq. The current version of the story reflects this change.*

*The Paly Voice*

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