



Military Moms & Families

WEAVING A NETWORK OF SUPPORT

BY TRACY WILL

PHOTOGRAPHY BY OLIVE JUICE STUDIOS

Back row left to right: Victoria O'Brien, Vanessa Ehni, Lu Schuett, Sandy Goodman, Barb Hauber, Heidi Heymann-Hilgers, Laura Hughes, Judy Reitmeyer-Hunt, Barb Kriesel. Front row left to right: Nanette Christenson, Lisa Meddock, Pauline Berg, Mary Rettke, Julianne Angstman, Teresa Silker.

We've watched the scenes on the news when National Guard and Reserve troops leave for a deployment: the long hugs, the tearful goodbyes. We've witnessed, too, the joyful homecomings, the cheering crowds and beaming faces of families reunited when troops return.

But what about the months in between, when a service member is gone? Or the time following the return home? How do military families cope with long stretches of separation from loved ones? How do they deal with their worry and concern? What happens after the happy reunions fade from the screen, and family members strive to reconnect with one another?

For two area organizations, it's those less-visible times that are their focus. Blue Star Mothers of America and Beyond the Yellow Ribbon are working hard to support military families as well as build community awareness of and involvement in the issues those families face.

A place of understanding

Julianne Angstman is a mom well aware of the challenges that come with having family members in the military. Her two sons, Captains Keith and Todd Angstman, are both currently on active duty in the Army. Between the two of them, they've served five deployments.

"Having children in the military is nerve-wracking," says Angstman, who is president of Blue Star Mothers of America, Minnesota Chapter 10, in Rochester. "Sometimes when we talk about it with people who don't have family in the military, the conversations can be pretty short. With the Blue Star moms, we can talk about it as much as we want and everyone understands."

Blue Star Mothers of America is an organization whose history dates back to World War II. The group is open to all women who have a child in the military. The local chapter serves as a support network for its members, participates in community events, and sponsors fundraisers to benefit military and veterans' organizations.

Nancy Salvo joined the Rochester Blue Star Mothers in 2007. Her son, Staff Sergeant Anthony Salvo, is on active duty in the Army where his work involves disposing of bombs.

"I worry because it's so dangerous. But I'm very proud of him and support him in every way I can. He's never, ever far from my mind," says Salvo. "It seems a lot of people don't think about the fact that we're at war. One of the things Blue Star moms do is march in parades around the area. That helps make the community more aware that we have men and women in dangerous situations and, we hope, prompts them to think about how they can help, too."



(Right) Teresa Silker's son, Matthew, pilots Black Hawk helicopters as a captain in the Army. He was deployed in March and is stationed in Fort Riley, Kansas. "I needed to have people who would understand what I am going through during his deployment," she said about joining Blue Star Mothers. "Every person there knows exactly how you are feeling."

Learn more...

Blue Star Mothers of America:
bluestarmothers.org,
bluestarmomsmn.com
The local chapter meets the second Wednesday of every month (excluding July) at 6 p.m. in the Rochester Athletic Club Café. All military mothers are welcome.

Beyond the Yellow Ribbon:
beyondtheyellowribbonsemin.com
 and on Facebook at Beyond the Yellow Ribbon Southeast Minnesota
These sites include a list of upcoming events, as well as a wide variety of volunteer opportunities.



Julianne Angstman (left) is president of the Rochester Blue Star Mothers. She has two sons on active duty in the Army. Hair and makeup by Erin Schnell at Salon Thairapy

Among their many projects, the Blue Star Mothers have sent care packages to military personnel, raised money to support Fisher House Foundation—an organization that provides lodging for families of military members who are hospitalized—and supported Operation Welcome Home (see sidebar).

The Blue Star Mothers enthusiastically encourage community members to get involved to support current military members and their families. And, they ask that people remember veterans, too.

"Anytime you have an opportunity to support veterans, do it. Don't forget to honor them," says Angstman. "We love that our kids get the recognition they deserve. But some others didn't have that. They still need our support. Attend Memorial Day and Veterans Day events. Donate to veterans' causes. We all owe them that for their service."

A community responsibility

For Susan Bertram, whose son Captain Matt Textor is on active duty in the Army and was deployed to Iraq during 2009, supporting the military in tangible ways isn't just a nice thing to do, it's part of a community's responsibility.

"We, as a community, have sent these service people off to war. We've elected our congress people and senators, and they've decided it's in our country's best interest to be in two wars,"

says Bertram. "Because Minnesota doesn't have any active-duty bases, people who serve from our state are taken directly from the community. Their jobs, businesses and neighborhoods are affected. We're all interconnected."

In an effort to garner more community support and provide opportunities for people to help, Bertram serves on the steering committee for Beyond the Yellow Ribbon Southeast Minnesota. Beyond the Yellow Ribbon was created by the Minnesota National Guard to provide services, training and resources to service members and their families before, during and after deployment. Its services are available to anyone who has a family member serving in any branch of the military.

"In the early weeks of Matt's deployment, I tried to keep myself occupied as much as possible in an effort not to think about it too much. I decided I needed to do something to help other military families, so I wasn't so focused on myself," says Bertram. "Beyond the Yellow Ribbon resonated well with what I wanted to do. I couldn't do much to help my son in Iraq, but I could help other families here."

Since its inception in 2009, Beyond the Yellow Ribbon Southeast Minnesota has hosted monthly events for military families, partnered with other organizations—such as Family Service Rochester—and participated in training for professionals—



Ironwood Springs Christian Ranch hosts Operation Welcome Home weekends twice a year for military veterans and their spouses. They receive quilts from Quilts of Valor, a quilting guild from Mabel, Minn.

Photo by Karen Heinke

Marriage Matters

Coming home after a long deployment sounds like heaven, and many service members do have joyful homecomings. But reintegrating back into daily family life—when your family has learned how to live without you at home—can be tough. Reconnecting with a spouse brings its own challenges, too.

To help ease the process, and to provide a relaxing getaway, Ironwood Springs Christian Ranch in Stewartville hosts Operation Welcome Home for Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom veterans and their spouses. This couples' retreat weekend is held twice a year, at no cost to military personnel.

The weekend includes sessions on parenting, communication, anger management, conflict resolution, finances, faith and marriage. Downtime is available for couples to enjoy the ranch's activities, including horseback riding, campfires and wagon rides. On Saturday evening, there's a candlelight dinner and on Sunday morning, the couples renew their wedding vows.

Each couple that attends also receives a handmade quilt to take home, crafted by Quilts of Valor, a quilting guild from Mabel, Minn.

The next Operation Welcome Home weekend is Sept. 17–19, 2010. For more information, visit ironwoodsprings.com/operationwelcomehome.aspx or call Ironwood Springs at 507-533-4315.

including faith leaders and day care providers—to help them understand the issues facing military families. In recognition of these efforts, Rochester and Olmsted County have both received official Beyond the Yellow Ribbon designations from the Minnesota National Guard.

A way to connect

Two Beyond the Yellow Ribbon events, a Halloween party and a spring celebration, held at Rochester Community and Technical College and organized in conjunction with RCTC students and staff, were particularly well received.

“The kids had a ball and people told us they appreciated the chance to meet other families who have dads or moms in the military,” says Bertram. “These were perfect examples of how you can get one organization involved with another organization, and it can touch so many lives. The families benefited, and the students' and faculty members' lives were touched, too.”

Making those connections among military families and within the community is key to providing meaningful support.

“Many nonmilitary families don't know how to respond when someone has a loved one a world away in a war situation. But I think everyone can open their eyes a bit to learn what they can do,” says Bertram. “With Beyond the Yellow Ribbon, we're giving people specific ways help out. When it comes down to it, a community is only as good as we are relating to one another. From my perspective, we have a phenomenal community here.”

Tracy Will is a local freelance writer who would like to gratefully acknowledge the service members in her life, particularly her grandfather, Robert Reed, a WWII veteran, and her friend, Army veteran Jennifer Harveland, who graciously provided input for this article.

Jessica Hansen, a 2006 graduate of Mayo High School, is engaged to Army Staff Sergeant Patrick Zeigler Jr., who sustained four gunshot wounds, including one to the head, at Ft. Hood on Nov. 5, 2009. They recently arrived in Rochester so Zeigler could get medical care at Mayo Clinic. “Though I am a Rochester native and we are planning our wedding here, Patrick had never been to Rochester until I transported him here for medical care,” said Hansen. “This town and its veterans have embraced Patrick as one of our own and given us more support, compassion, and resources than we could ever imagine.”

