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Gold Star Spouses share common ground, overcoming adversities, need for support

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FORT SAM HOUSTON TEXAS, (March 26, 2018)- In 2010, Cindy Hildner and her husband, Brig. Gen. Terry Hildner, the new Commanding General of the 13th Expeditionary Sustainment Command at Fort Hood, toured their newly assigned garrison. They stopped at the Survivor Outreach Services office and visited the Hall of Heroes, where the walls are covered with pictures of Fallen Soldiers. The next time Cindy Hildner saw that office was after her husband was killed in Kabul, Afghanistan.

Hildner became a Gold Star Spouse on Feb. 3, 2012.

A Gold Star Spouse is a husband or wife whose spouse passed away while serving in the U.S. military. They are the survivors of their fallen Soldiers. The U.S. Army annually recognizes April 5 as Gold Star Spouses day.

Surviving military spouses share many experiences after they lose a loved one. The survivors lunge into a new life as a widow, re-defining their identity, continue to raise their children, and seek support among other widows in groups like SOS.

SOS is a program the U.S. Army offers through the Installation Management Command at garrisons. They offer long term support and services to surviving Family members once the Casualty Assistance Center completes the initial phase of support. SOS is the main conduit to help survivors find and understand information about their benefits and entitlements. They also provide essential social support to help survivors navigate the grief process.

Raquel Scates' husband, Staff Sgt. William Daniel Scates, worked with the 130th infantry unit at Fort Stewart. He died while deployed in Arab Jabour, Iraq, and Scates became a Gold Star Spouse on Aug. 11, 2007.

Donna Engeman and her husband, Chief Warrant Officer 4 John Engeman, were stationed at Fort Bragg where he worked as a maintenance warrant. He went on deployment to Rustamiyah, Iraq, and lost his life on May 14, 2006, making Engeman a Gold Star Spouse.

Before Soldiers deploy, they attend a pre-deployment briefing. Spouses and family members of the Soldier are encouraged to attend as well. They receive information regarding where their Soldier will be and how to stay in contact with them. Various organizations at the garrison talk with the couples about what documents they need to have in order, what to expect when the Soldier is overseas as well as offer resources for those staying back home to make the deployment as smooth as possible. Family members are also briefed about what to do if their Soldier is injured or killed.

Additionally, Family Readiness Groups are formed for the spouses and families members who stay at home once the Soldiers deploy. FRGs offer support and communication between the family members, the Soldiers and their unit. FRGs give the Soldiers and families a little peace of mind and help the Soldiers remain ready and resilient both physically and psychologically so they can focus on their mission when the time comes.

Hildner, Scates and Engeman unanimously agree that when their spouse died, grief wiped out all of the information from the pre-deployment briefings.

"During the briefing[s] you're thinking 'whatever', or you half-way listen to it. But I think even if you paid close attention and you wrote notes, the way that grief works, stuff just goes right out the window." Engeman said.

Losing a spouse is the beginning of a grim and challenging process for Gold Star Spouses.

"Adjusting to living life after your spouse dies is an on-going difficult process," said Scates, a health and wellness coach and mother. "I had difficulties with it for many years; it will be 11 years in 2018. I honestly did not deal with my grief until last year."

Hildner, a contract specialist for Mission Installations Contracting Command at Fort Sam Houston, agrees, saying that you don't just move on or get over the death, you move forward.

"There are triggers every day; some days are good and some days are not so good. It is not going to go away, you just learn to deal with it differently as time passes."

All three spouses had children at the time of their husbands' deaths, presenting a challenge while processing the situation. Hildner has four children, and Engeman and Scates each have two. Scates did not deal with her grief right away because of her dedication to her children she said.

"I had two small kids when he passed away. My oldest, Jade, was nine years old and my youngest, Kendra, was seven months old. I didn't have any choice but to keep going and focus on my girls. I shoved [the death] aside and didn't deal with it until 2017."

Engeman, former IMCOM Family and Morale Welfare and Recreation SOS program manager, now thinks of her children when she thinks of her husband.

"This far along [after his death], I have good memories. I can look back at his legacy now because he left two children, Patrick and Nicole, and now we have 2 grandchildren. Our children never got to see their grandparents because we were always stationed far away, but now I am getting the chance to watch our grandchildren grow; it's bittersweet."

When Engeman and Scates became widows, SOS had not yet been established. It was not until later that they were able to use the program and meet other widows who shared the same experiences they were going through.

"When Iraq and Afghanistan came along, we had transformed everything about warfighting, everything, except how we deal with casualties and how we support families of the fallen. That hadn't changed since almost Vietnam," Engeman said. "When my husband died [the Army] said, here's these entitlements and life insurance, thanks for your service, have a great life. That's what it was like before SOS."

Once SOS was established, Gold Star Spouses had more resources and connections to programs and others in the same situation. Scates found the program once she moved to San Antonio.

"I actually joined a Facebook group in 2009 called 'San Antonio Military Widows'. We had a get together and I heard about SOS through one of the widows. It wasn't until 2012 that I went and found them on post."

Scates credits SOS for helping her create a support system.

"SOS gave me some direction. I was lost having no type of support like that in the beginning. I don't know where I would be if there wasn't SOS. All of the surviving spouses have common ground, we all know how it feels. I wish it had existed from the beginning when my husband passed away."

Hildner mentioned the benefits and resources SOS gave her when she was at Fort Hood.

“I didn’t know a lot of widows when my husband passed and SOS gave me a lifeline. They helped a lot with the education aspect and scholarships because I had two boys, Ryan and John, going to college. Fort Hood also had a lot of SOS events at the time where I met other widows. There is nothing to compare when you meet someone who knows what you’re going through.”

Engeman participated in programs with other widows to help the healing process.

“I participated in a community service project where we put a roof on a disabled man’s house. It was a great way to heal through service. SOS is a great way to stay connected to the Army family. Without SOS I probably would have been stuck in a mud puddle somewhere instead of crawling my way out and building a life.”

The Gold Star Spouses enjoy giving back and helping other survivors. Scates teaches health and wellness classes at Fort Sam Houston for other widows to offer a form of healing. Hildner counsels new widows as they come into the program.

The spouses pointed out that they want Fort Sam Houston’s chapter to be more active so they can become more involved again and help other survivors.

“I want to know when there are new widows in the area so we can help them and bring them into the community,” Hildner said.

Frank Torean, Survivor Outreach Services region specialist, said he is continually working on improving the garrison’s local program, admitting that SOS needs to become better at actively seeking out new widows. He understands the importance of the spouses coming together because they can teach each other a lot as well as mentor and aid each other.

Surviving spouses continually use each other as lifelines to get through tough situations and come together to heal because, as Hildner mentioned, nothing compares to when you met another widow who knows how you feel and knows what you are going through.

Aside from Gold Star Spouses Day on April 5, the Army also recognizes Gold Star Families and Mothers annually in September.

LINKS:

Army MWR http://www.IMCOM.Army.mil.
Department of Defense News https://www.defense.gov/News/

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Picture Captions:

1: Gold Star Spouses, Cindy Hildner, Raquel Scates and Donna Engeman stand in front of the Gold Star Service Flag at the Installation Management Command Headquarters at JBSA Fort Sam Houston. The Gold Star Service Flag represents a Service member who has been killed or died while serving in the military. Gold Star Spouses are survivors to their Soldiers who died while serving in the U.S. Army. The Army annually recognizes April 5 as Gold Star Spouses day to honor the sacrifices the spouses have made.

2: Cindy Hildner, a contract specialist for Mission Installations Contracting Command at Fort Sam Houston, holds the last picture taken of her and her husband Brig. Gen. Terry Hildner. He was killed in Kabul, Afghanistan on Feb. 3, 2012 making Cindy a Gold Star Spouse. A Gold Star Spouse is a survivor to their Solider who died while serving in the U.S. Army.

3. Raquel Scates, a health and wellness coach, cherishes a picture of her husband Staff Sgt. William Daniel Scates. He was killed in Arab Jabour, Iraq, on Aug. 11, 2007, making Raquel a Gold Star Spouse. A Gold Star Spouse is a survivor to their Solider who died while serving in the U.S. Army.

4. Cindy Hildner wears her Gold Star Pin and a locket of the Gold Star Flag. The pins is given to the Gold Star Spouses when their Soldier dies. The Gold Star Service Flag represents a Service member who has been killed or died while serving in the Military Hildner bought the locket and had her late husband's name inscribed on the back. On the inside is a picture of Brig. Gen. Hildner and a picture of the American flag.