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Moms of Hometown Heroes

Blue Star Moms support each other while their children serve in the military

By Jen Reeder

Durango resident Melissa Davis is a familiar face around town – her bubbly personality makes her a popular manager at Carpe Denim, as she was when she ran the Volunteers of America Thrift Store. Although she has a big smile for everyone she meets, she’s also constantly worried about her 23-year-old son, Kegan, a.k.a. Private First Class Doane of the United States Army, who deployed to Afghanistan in February. His job as a combat engineer involves, among other duties, “route clearance” – patrolling roads for bombs.

“At first when he told me he was going to be a combat engineer, he said he was going to build roads and put roofs on school houses in third world countries,” Davis said. “Then I come to find out he’s poking bombs with a stick – it’s a little different.”

When her phone rang around 3 a.m. on April 6, she leapt out of bed. It was her son, calling to tell her that his vehicle had hit a landmine that exploded – but he was OK.

“I probably spent two days crying,” Davis said through tears. “Some people say he shouldn’t have told me, but I disagree. I think it’s important for me to know, as his mom, what he does and what he’s up against. I know what they do is important because without them looking for those bombs, then other units traveling up and down those roads would be in danger.”

Fortunately, when he first enlisted in the Army, Kegan had encouraged his mom to join a support group for families with children serving in the military, the Durango chapter of Blue Star Mothers of America, known locally as “Blue Star Moms.”

“He said, ‘You’re gonna need a support group,’ and sure enough ... I’m very fond of them,” Davis said.

A Blue Star flag is hung in homes of families with a member serving in the military. A Gold Star covers the blue one if that soldier is killed. The Blue Star Moms meet regularly to assemble care packages for troops serving overseas, personalize U.S. flags for soldiers’ graves at Greenmount Cemetery, share stories, and plan fundraisers and events, such as an annual retreat for Gold Star Moms.

“We’re just here to support each other,” said Jill Coddington, president of Blue Star Moms. “We’re a small group but a close group.”

Coddington’s son John is a staff sergeant in the Air Force, a canine handler who has been deployed twice – to Qatar and the United Arab Emirates – and will soon be deployed to Kyrgyzstan. She’ll never forget

the first time she marched in a Bayfield parade with other Blue Star Moms, proudly carrying a photo of John.

“We round the corner and everyone stands up and starts applauding. Tears were streaming down my face,” she said. “We just appreciate their support.”

Support comes from both sides of the political aisle – Blue Star Moms is a non-partisan, non-political organization.

“We’re not Democrat or Republican – we’re all of it,” Coddington said. “We’re just there to support our kids and other people’s kids who are out there defending the freedoms that we have here in the United States.”

At a care package meeting of the Blue Star Moms on May 18, concerned and proud parents and siblings worked together to sort through donations from various community members, such as Girl Scout cookies donated by a local troop and food from churches. Often that pride was literally worn on members’ chests; Diana Kroenig displayed her support for her daughter with a “Proud Air Force Parent – Lackland AFB” sweatshirt, and Vicky Hawman’s sweatshirt touted the Army’s military police for her son, Cody, who recently turned 20 and will be deployed to Iraq in July.

“I’m OK until I think about it and then I cry,” Hawman says. “You just have to know they’ve been trained and think positive thoughts.”

Durango resident Gilbert Martinez is proud to be the group’s first “Blue Star Dad.” His son Ryan serves in the Marines and has already been deployed five times to Iraq and will be deployed somewhere overseas again in July. He called over his other children Molly, 5; Niko, 8, and Morgan, 9; saying, “These are Ryan’s biggest fans. It chokes me up – they have sleepless nights when he’s gone.”

Morgan grinned and said, “My brother’s my favorite person in the whole wide world.”

It’s not uncommon for siblings to help out at care package meetings. Joni Smith, 17, has two brothers in the Army, Stephen and Darcel, and both have served in Iraq.

“I like being able to give the soldiers food, because sometimes the food over there gets boring,” Smith said.

Durango resident and Blue Star Mom Chrissie Tonge rarely watches the news because her 22-year-old son Michael is serving with the Army in Afghanistan – and her youngest son is going into the Army. In addition, her daughter-in-law will graduate soon from basic training.

“I warned my son he better not make me a Gold Star Mom,” she said. “He said it’s part of his job – if it happens, it happens. He wants to be doing something he’s proud of.”

Tonge says though people may not agree with the war, they should support the volunteer soldiers defending the country. She was very upset to learn of two separate incidents in Durango in which a stranger spit on a soldier in uniform.

“We can’t do that,” she said. “If you see someone walking down the street and they’re in uniform, say thank you. They do it for our country.”

Davis, who is still recovering from the shock of her son Kegan’s brush with death in Afghanistan, wholeheartedly agrees.

“We might not agree with why we’re over there, but it’s kind of hard not to support these men and women over there who are doing this on a daily basis,” she said. “There’s definitely people who are not going to appreciate what Kegan does. And that’s the freedom Kegan fights for ... that’s the beautiful thing about America: you can stand on that side of the street over there and protest the war, while I stand over here and ask you to come pack boxes for a 23-year-old. I just want people to realize the cost of war – on a local level, and a community level. It’s one thing to watch the news, but another thing to know how many of your hometown heroes are actually here.”

Tax-deductible donations for care packages can be sent to: Blue Star Moms, c/o Jill Coddington, 20 Ophir Drive, Durango, CO 81301. For more information about Blue Star Moms, contact Jill Coddington at 970-259-1813 or email jjcoddington@bresnet.net. For more information about PFC Kegan Doane’s unit in Afghanistan, visit www.rcsouthmisfits.com.