

SURVIV[★]RS

Remember the love, celebrate the life, share the journey

BY HEATHER GRAHAM
Sentinel News Editor

Ruth Holler, Cindy Dietz and Angel and Nathan Guereca are distinctly different, but in many ways, they share a lifelong bond. They were among those who came to Fort Hood last weekend to celebrate life and share their journeys in grief.

More than 200 adults and 100 children who have lost a servicemember gathered Friday and Saturday at Meadows Elementary School on Fort Hood for the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors Regional Seminar.

Co-sponsored by Fort Hood's Survivor Outreach Services and TAPS, the seminar provided workshops and activities for survivors to help with grief.

For surviving family members, TAPS and SOS provide a conduit to services and links to help with anything from services to support. At Fort Hood, a TAPS office is located inside the SOS building. Both organizations are there for all survivors of fallen servicemembers, regardless of the cause or manner of their loved one's death.

This was the second year that Fort Hood has hosted the TAPS Regional Seminar.

"The families loved it," Vanessa Gabrielson, TAPS youth programs, said.

Workshops included financial planning, relaxation techniques, real estate, after-death communication and self-defense. Line dancing and make-and-take crafts gave families some down time during the semi-



Children of fallen Soldiers at TAPS Good Grief Camp got to spend some time with Military Working Dog Block during the weekend seminar at Fort Hood.

nar. Families also had access to survivor benefit information.

"We try to have something for everyone," Gabrielson said.

Their stories were different. Parents of fallen servicemembers, children who lost a parent or sibling, fiancés and significant others and widowed spouses came together to remember their fallen servicemem-

ber. Although the stories were different, the beginning was the same for all.

"We are all here because someone died," Darcie Sims said.

Sims, director of Training and Certification for TAPS, has been with the group since 1995. She is

See *Journey*, C7



Photo by Gloria Montgomery, WTB Public Affairs

Gold Star mother and author Deborah Tainsh hugs Warrior Transition Brigade squad leader, Staff Sgt. Miguel LeFlore. Tainsh visited the WTB Friday to visit with Soldiers and to talk to them about grieving and coping with the loss of a battle buddy.

Gold Star mom turns grief to encouragement by writing

BY RACHEL PARKS
Sentinel Staff

Writing has always been an important part of Deb Tainsh's life. She wrote poetry and kept journals over the years but when tragedy struck her family, writing turned into a way to cope and to help other people through some of the darkest hours of their lives.

On Feb. 11, 2004, Sgt. Patrick Tainsh was killed in Iraq while stationed with the 2nd Armored Cavalry Regiment. While working through her grief, Deb picked up the pen again.

"Patrick was my husband's only child. This man that I loved, this son that I loved, I could not let him be forgotten," she said.

When Deb was finished writing she realized she had a book, "Heart of a Hawk." The book chronicles Patrick's life and death as well as the grief his family lived with.

"It's our personal journey," Tainsh said. "I talk about it all. The good, the bad, the ugly."

But Tainsh wasn't done yet. She felt she still had more to offer other Gold Star families reeling from loss.

"We will never be the same. We are learning how to carry on in our new normal," she said.

A year after Patrick was killed, Tainsh and her husband were watching television when they saw a commercial for the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors. Both of them went on to become peer mentors with TAPS.

In the course of meeting other families and attending events designed for those who had lost a servicemember, an idea for another book began to form for Tainsh.

"Often times what helped parents the most was hearing the stories from other Gold Star families and validating their emotions," she said.

But she wondered how families who lived in isolated areas or didn't have the means to travel to events where Gold Star families met, coped with their losses. So Tainsh turned to the internet and the large group of Gold Star families she had met over the years and asked if a book detailing the individual stories of servicemembers who were killed in action would be helpful.

The response was overwhelming. Tainsh created an extensive questionnaire for the families to fill out about their loved ones and gave them a year to send their responses back to her. At the end of the year, 25 families had responded. The book, "Surviving the Folded Flag" was released on the 2010 Memorial Day weekend.

Another Gold Star mother, Ruth Holler, who lost her son, Lance Cpl. Luke Holler on Nov. 2, 2006, in Iraq, where he was stationed with 4th Marine Division, Marine Forces Reserve, said both of the books Tainsh wrote were important tools as she and her family worked through their grief.

"As I started reading I could find myself in there. One story could have been my story. The mother talked about how she struggled with her faith. It was good to connect and hear and

feel how we're all in the same boat and the struggles are the same," said Holler.

Tainsh was at Fort Hood for the TAPS events and to sign her books at the Clear Creek Post Exchange on Sunday. The proceeds of both of her books go back to the TAPS program.

Tainsh continues to write and has continued to seek out survivors in need of comforting. Over the years she has become more active with the Wounded Warrior program. She has a new book, specifically aimed at wounded warriors, that is just getting off the ground. Her latest project is a book filled with letters of encouragement from Gold Star families to the wounded.

"I feel as a Gold Star family, we have something to offer the wounded warriors. We are all carrying grief for the same people," she said.

"Dear Warrior and Hero - Encouragement from Gold Star Families of the Fallen," is not currently available to the public, but Tainsh is doing all she can to get it into the hands of wounded warriors. Her stop at Fort Hood was just the first of what she hopes will be an expanded program.

Tainsh said each day she strives to tell her son's story and help and encourage others along the way. "This is Patrick's legacy. We want his life to touch as many other lives as possible," she said.



Photo composite by Rachel Parks, Sentinel Staff

Children and mentors watch balloons drift over Fort Hood during the TAPS balloon release on Saturday. More than 100 children and teens took part, letting go of balloons that carried personal messages to their loved ones. The balloon release was one of the final events of the Fort Hood Survivor Seminar and Good Grief Camp.

Free flying lessons for children of fallen

BY HEATHER GRAHAM
Sentinel News Editor

As a casualty assistance officer, Jack Howell saw the pain of losing a servicemember.

"I'm dedicated to trying to do something for these kids," he said. "The kids are often overlooked."

Howell, a retired Marine colonel, started Teens-in-Flight in 1994 as a high school program to help at-risk children in Jacksonville, Fla.

The program has since expanded to Gold Star children and the children of severely wounded warriors. With a program established at Fort Carson, Colo., Howell is now look-

ing to expand to Fort Hood.

Under Teens-in-Flight, selected teens are offered flight and classroom lessons and the opportunity to receive their private pilot's license at no charge to their families.

"This gives these kids something they never thought in a million years they could do," Howell said. "It's unique because it's all free."

Howell has partnered with a flight school in Austin to provide the training. Now, he needs five teens who can meet the eligibility.

The program eligibility requirements are a 1,000-word essay on "Why I want to Fly," age 13 and older with 2.5 grade-point average

or higher, interview, drug screening and recommendation from school principal/superintendent.

Scholarship Selection priorities include a parent killed in action in the Global War on Terrorism, parent wounded and severely disabled in Global War on Terrorism, low-income families and those considered "at risk."

Fort Hood Child, Youth and School Services and Survivor Outreach Services are on board with the program.

For more information about the program, visit the website at www.teens-in-flight.com or call CYSS at 287-8029.