

LOCAL NEWS

Holiday gifts sought for veterans' spouses

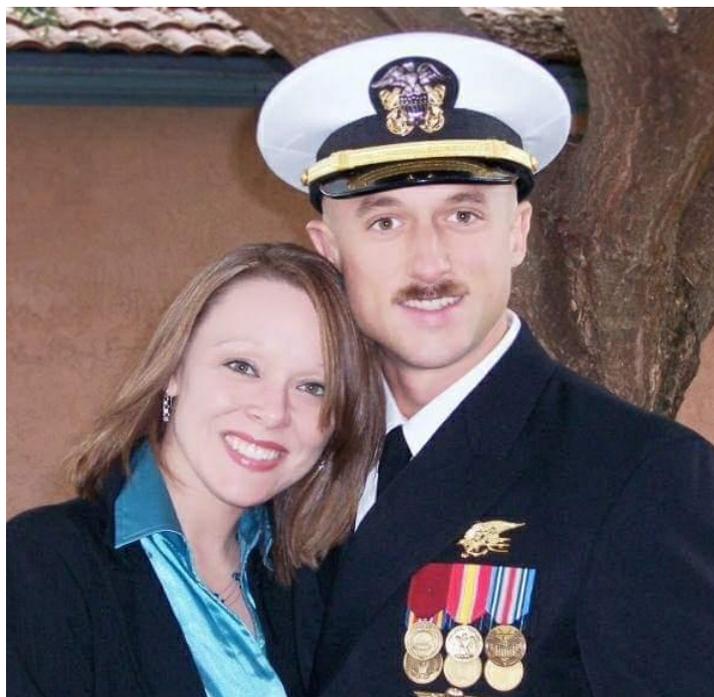
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Christina Jolliffe | The Chronicle-Telegram



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Antonette and Ryan, a Hearts of Patriots family, live in California. He served in the Army and is 100percent disabled. Currently, she is a full-time caregiver to Ryan. She has a degree in radio and television broadcasting and had been working in video production since the age of 16. Antonette says, "With everything I have been through I have been thinking of going back to school and getting my masters and possibly going to medical school." Ryan and I have been married for almost five years this coming January. We have a very sweet 2-year-old Weimaraner/German shepherd mix that we love to train and play with."



Jessica and Kristian, a Hearts of Patriots family, live in Virginia and have three children, 12, 15 and 18. Kris served in the Navy for 14 years and was medically separated in 2012. He is rated by the VA as 100 percent disabled and suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder. Jessica loves reading, gardening and spending time with her kids. She loves concerts and the theater and is a full-time student at George Mason University.



Hearts of Patriots family Dana and Addison live in North Carolina with their four children-the youngest is 4 and the 6-year old is autistic. Addison is a Marine and is 100 percent disabled with a 70 percent PTSD rating. Dan said, "I enjoy gardening, cooking/baking, anything artistic, exercising, hiking and birdwatching (surprisingly) are all my happy places."

ELYRIA – As the holidays approach, everyone tends to want to reach out and help.

The hungry, the homeless, the veterans, the children, the elderly animals in shelters – the plight of

those in need becomes everyone's plight this time of year.

But there is one group that is often overlooked – the spouses of the veterans who return home from service suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and/or traumatic brain injury. These spouses become caregivers, so busy taking care of their spouse, their family and their home, that there is no one to take care of them.

Last year, Denise Gula Weller, Hearts of Patriots co-founder and executive director, wanted to change that.

Her organization advertised the Hearts of Patriots' Adopt-a-Vet Spouse/Caregiver for the Holidays and was able to pair 32 caregivers with holiday donors.

This year, she wants to do more.

"Within 48 hours of putting it on the website, we had 210 applications," Gula Weller said. "I had to shut it down."

Gula Weller attributes the uptick in applications to the fact that her 1 1/2-year-old organization, which she co-founded with her daughter, Megan Cain, a vet spouse caregiver, has become more visible in the veteran's community.

So far, Gula Weller has been able to confirm 30 matches with another 15 possible commitments, but she would like to match all 210 applicants with a donor.

Donors are asked to commit to a \$100 gift card for grocery purchases for a holiday dinner, and a \$50 wrapped gift for the caregiver.

"It's pretty much like pulling teeth to get a list," Gula Weller said. "They are uncomfortable with it. They are not used to getting anything for themselves and are surprised that anyone would remember them around the holidays."

Usually, the spouses ask for books, or a sweater, maybe a hat and glove set, or a journal.

"I usually get something like, 'I love to garden, cook and read books,' so I have to contact them back and ask for titles they have read, their favorite colors and their size. They really aren't used to getting things, so they typically ask for small items. No one asks for the moon."

If someone volunteers to sponsor a spouse, Gula Weller gives them the name and contact information of the person they will be helping. The sponsor then ships the wrapped gift or gifts and grocery gift card directly to the spouse.

She tries to match local sponsors with local spouses, but Hearts of Patriots reaches nationwide with families from coast to coast.

"Some people really want to do something in the community this time of year, and I get that, but this is a very specific group, and they aren't any less important just because they aren't necessarily in our backyard," she said.

All of the applicants are checked out and have to submit paperwork confirming their veterans disability status.

"These are people who are just trying to get through each day," Gula Weller said. "There is so much chaos this time of year that they are doing everything they can do to keep their home calm for their spouse and family."

Throughout the year, Hearts of Patriots works to make sure veterans' spouses are not forgotten. Spouses can join the caregiver program, which puts them in the organization's rotation for the year. They receive informational material, a \$5 Starbucks gift card, a PTSD book and pin.

"Just a little welcome package that is fun and informative," Gula Weller said.

Throughout the year, they also receive a birthday card and two random gifts. One spouse, whose 33-year-old husband was diagnosed with leukemia from the burn pits in Afghanistan and developed a tumor on his spine, was gifted a spa day at a facility near her home.

Another woman who was really struggling and submitted an application for Adopt-a-Vet Spouse said she really wanted a deep house cleaning, but knew that was not possible, so she asked for socks and other small items. Gula Weller found a reputable home cleaning business in her area and prepaid for a top-to-bottom house cleaning.

"They are always very moved," Gula Weller said. "They're a forgotten part of our military society. We know what vets go through, and we're very supportive. But we often don't know what the spouse is going through. They are the ones who are holding everything together every day."

For more information on how to become a sponsor, visit www.vetspouse.org or email denise@vetspouse.org by Dec. 11.

To learn more about Hearts of Patriots, visit www.vetspouse.org.

Contact Christina Jolliffe at (440) 329-7155 or ctnews@chroniclet.com.

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