

For the Loved Ones of Those Who Served and Died

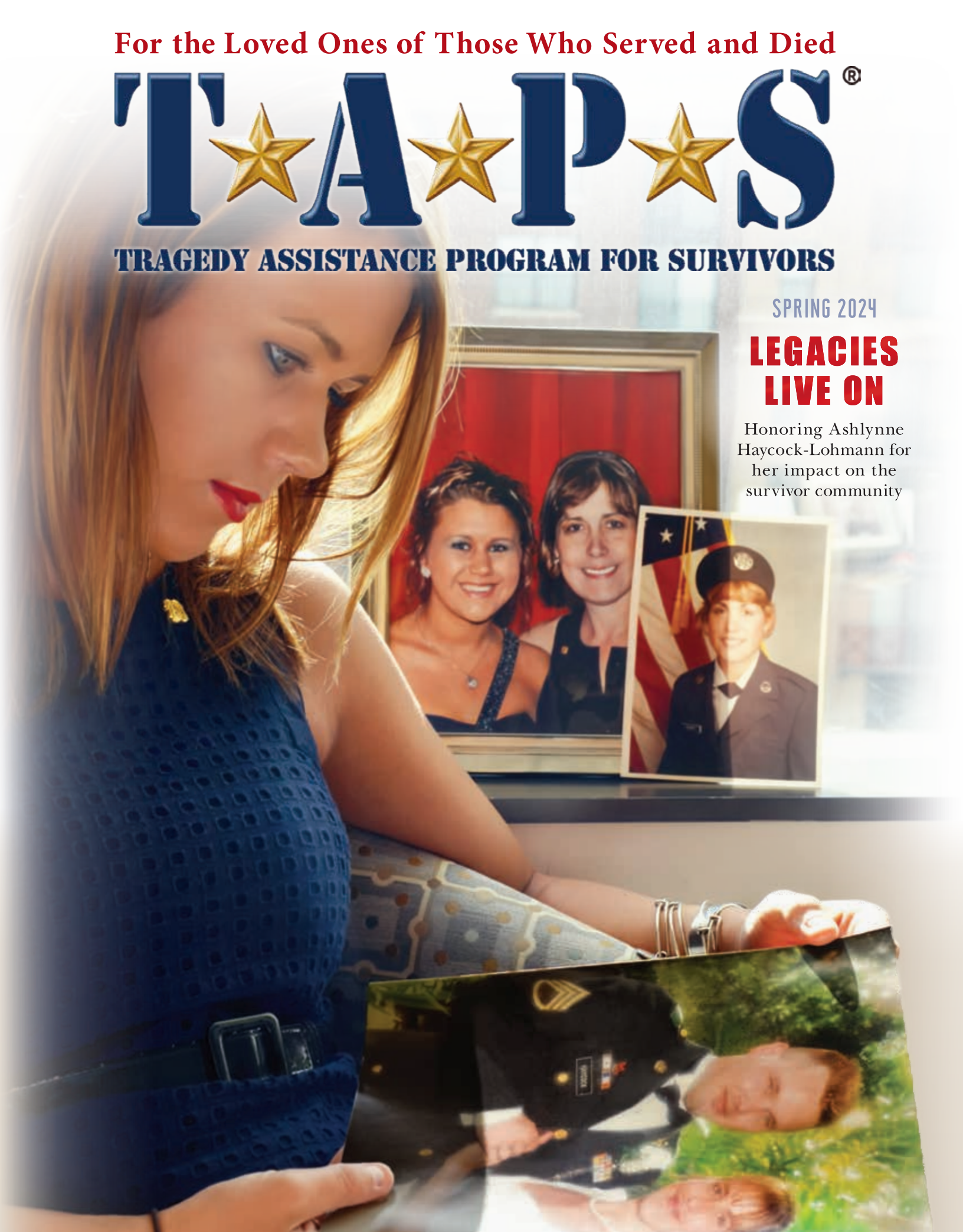
T A P S[®]

TRAGEDY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM FOR SURVIVORS

SPRING 2024

LEGACIES LIVE ON

Honoring Ashlynn
Haycock-Lohmann for
her impact on the
survivor community



“ I wish you knew how much of you there is in everything I do. It can be the smallest thing...trivial...mundane...

But you're there,
under the surface of it somewhere.

I wish you knew how I carry you with me always...everywhere I go.”

— Ranata Suzuki





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Care Groups
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Women's Empowerment
Men's Program
Young Adults Program
Youth Programs
Sports & Entertainment Events

* For full descriptions, see pages 18-19.



ON THE COVER: TAPS is honored to recognize Ashlynn Haycock-Lohmann as the 2024 TAPS Senator Ted Stevens Leadership Award recipient. Ashlynn, a surviving daughter and TAPS' Deputy Director

of Government and Legislative Affairs, first came to TAPS as a Good Grief Camper, and she has grown up surrounded by her TAPS Family. She remains dedicated to serving the survivor community through her fierce advocacy on the Hill. Read more about Ashlynn's work and her deep-rooted connection to TAPS beginning on page 22. COVER PHOTO: ASHLYNNE HAYCOCK-LOHMANN; TAPS ARCHIVES

About TAPS

Caring for the Families of America's Fallen Heroes

We are a family of military survivors ready to embrace and connect all who grieve the death of a military or veteran loved one with resources, services, and programs. TAPS provides support to survivors 24/7, regardless of the manner of death, the duty status at the time of death, the survivor's relationship to the deceased, or the survivor's phase in their grief journey.

At TAPS, we open our hearts and resources to the world with our award-winning programs and services to support all military bereaved. TAPS works with leading experts in the fields of grief, bereavement, trauma, and peer support to integrate decades of research on military grief into action to help heal hearts.

At TAPS, we:

Honor and Remember the lives of our military loved ones and celebrate military survivors as the living legacies of their service and sacrifice.

Empower survivors with healthy coping skills, resources, and opportunities to connect in the comfort of their home, their community, their region, and the nation to grow with their grief.

Connect all those grieving a military death to a nationwide network of peer-based, emotional survivor support and critical casework assistance 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Educate using research-informed best practices in bereavement and trauma care for survivors, and we advocate on behalf of survivors with policy and legislative priorities.

Create Community with survivors to provide comprehensive comfort, care, and resources where they live, when they need it, and in a manner comfortable for them.

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TAPS exceeds industry standards for financial accountability and out performs most charities. We are proud to have received many of the top nonprofit charity ratings available today. Our donors should be confident they are supporting an organization that is financially healthy, accountable, and transparent.



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Young military and veteran survivors join the USA Basketball Men's National Team on the court in Las Vegas for the national anthem before the USA Basketball World Cup game versus Puerto Rico on Aug. 7, 2023. For more memorable teams4taps moments from 2023, see their highlight reel on page 28. PHOTO: JOE MURPHY, 2023 NBAE

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To Our TAPS Family,



I am so proud to welcome you to the spring 2024 issue of *TAPS Magazine*. For some of you, this is the first issue of our magazine you've ever held, for others, you've grown fond of this quarterly hug from us to you. Either way, we know you hold it now because you've lost someone whose life included service to our nation, and we hope that the stories and photos in the following pages bring you comfort — no matter what season of grief you're in.

This year, we mark 30 years of TAPS — an anniversary that is a testament to the unshakable bond we share as the living legacies of our loved ones. Thirty years ago, TAPS was born out of a loss like yours and the realization that there was a critical need for peer-based emotional support for everyone whose heart was broken by their loss and who needed this safe space to come together with their military community. Together we have held each other as we have cried, honored our heroes, and come together as the living legacies of our loved ones.

Our family has grown significantly over the last 30 years, and whether your loss is new and you've just found TAPS, or you've been on this journey with us for many years, we are your family. No matter your relationship to your fallen hero, their duty status at the time of loss, or their manner of death, you have a place here — you belong. And, whether you seek comfort, hope, help in navigating survivor benefits, a community that knows the unique combination of pain and pride in your heart without explanation, or you aren't yet sure what you're seeking, we have programs and resources that fit your needs and can empower you to honor your fallen loved one and cope with your loss.

I hope that your connection with us continues after you've closed this magazine. Follow us on social media — @TAPSorg — for inspiration and updates. Attend or host a TAPS Togethers event or Care Group for a local survivor connection. Join us for the 30th Annual National Military Survivor Seminar and Good Grief Camp in Arlington, VA, over Memorial Day weekend, or register for one of our regional seminars and Good Grief Camps. Join the ongoing conversation in one of our online groups tailored to support specific types of loss and connections to the fallen — a way to feel the power of TAPS from anywhere in the world. Lean on your Peer Mentor and — when you're ready — take what you've learned about your grief and yourself and become a Peer Mentor as a way to continue your own healing while supporting a fellow survivor.

We hope to see you soon — whether in person or online — and provide a safe space to open your heart to healing and honor your hero. Together we are a family where hearts are healed, legacies live, and love is spoken.

With gratitude and comfort,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Bonnie".

Bonnie Carroll, *TAPS President and Founder*



PHOTO: TAPS ARCHIVES

Dear TAPS®

The TAPS community is not one-size-fits-all grief support. We offer programs that meet you wherever you are on your journey with grief, but also wherever you are on your journey of life. We love to hear how these programs create bonds and spark healing. See what fellow survivors have to say about two of our TAPS programs — Women’s Empowerment and Education Support Services, and be sure to visit taps.org/deartaps to let us know how TAPS has impacted your life after loss. Your words may just be what a fellow survivor needs to hear to take that first step toward healing.

IF NOT FOR TAPS

“TAPS is life-changing. My husband was KIA in 2004. I dealt with the grief by not dealing with it and just trying to go on in life. One of his battle buddies finally convinced me to get help in 2021, and I attended my first TAPS event. I finally found a place where I belonged and began to confront my grief. Since then, I have been to more TAPS events, met many lifelong friends, and have made many life-changing decisions. The Women’s Empowerment Retreat in Sedona in 2022 was amazing and has really inspired me to make changes for myself. I am now back in college and working toward my doctorate in sports performance psychology. I would never have made this decision if it were not for TAPS. I cannot thank this organization enough.”

LISA SANTONE BAKER

Surviving Spouse of 1LT Neil Anthony Santoriello, U.S. Army

THE COLLEGE EXPERIENCE

“From where I sit on my couch, I can see a stack of college acceptance packets for my daughter, Makena — offerings of scholarships, incentives, and slots in their computer science programs. This is a dream come true for her — a dream she didn’t even know she had until after the College Experience program. I don’t want to take an ounce away from Makena’s hard work, but the path was smoother and clearer because of the Education Support Services program at TAPS. So, go ahead and rejoice with me, and maybe shed a few tears. My baby is going to do great things, and you all were part of that. Thank you so much for your time and effort.”

SADIE CLARDY

Surviving Spouse of TSgt Michael Clardy, U.S. Air Force

EMPOWERED HEALING

TAPS’ Women’s Empowerment program brings surviving women together, both online and in person, to heal, lift each other up, and create community. Learn more about the healing power of the program and register for an online group session by visiting:



>> taps.org/empowerment

REGISTER FOR THE COLLEGE EXPERIENCE

Registration is now open for the 2024 TAPS College Experience. This is a chance for both teens and their parents or guardians to see the opportunities awaiting them in higher education. Begin your application now for the immersive experience that will provide college application and selection tips and critical benefit information for students, as well as dedicated sessions for parents and guardians ahead of the college years. To learn more and apply visit:



>> taps.org/collegeexperience

10K FOR DAD

Surviving Daughter Runs with the Marines to Honor Her Dad

Janet Kramer ✨ Surviving Daughter of MGySgt Jerry Gooch, U.S. Marine Corps, Ret.

Sitting at Dad's graveside at Arlington National Cemetery, I took a breath and looked around. I could hear the announcer's voice from the finish line at the Marine Corps Marathon on Sunday, October 29, 2023. I carefully undid the safety pins from my Team TAPS racing shirt and removed my race bib and laminated photo of Dad. I propped both up against the tombstone. Then I took off my 10K finisher's medal and draped it on top as my husband sat quietly next to me. In my mind, so many thoughts were rushing around. "I finally made it to this race...I ran past your old work...I ran past the cemetery...I finished with the Marines, Dad...I was at the Iwo Jima memorial...I wish we could have done this together...I ran this for you."

The Marine Corps Marathon had humble beginnings in 1976, when my dad, Jerry, ran it. It was called the Marine Corps Reserve Marathon that year. Dad was on recruiting duty in Willingboro, NJ, at the time and made the trip to D.C. for the race. My mom, Teresa, claims that Dad understood that the race was going to help the image of the Marine Corps after the Vietnam War. He ran 26.2 miles without a finisher's medal, race shirt, or crowds of supporters. Dad finished 296th out of 1,500 runners, with a time of three hours and 15 minutes.

Dad took to running in 1970, two years after he enlisted in the Marine Corps and graduated from boot camp in Parris Island. Running suited him.

It was something he could do anywhere, in any kind of weather. He just needed the road and a pair of running shoes. When Mom and Dad married in 1973, he was sent to Iwakuni, Japan, for a year. There, he would run twice a day to help pass the time. He ran several races there, the longest of which was 15 miles. In August 1977, he ran for his reenlistment, making the 20-odd-mile trip from Willingboro, NJ, to the Navy Yard in Philadelphia in three hours. Once there, he made it official and signed up for six additional years. After 30 years on active duty, Dad retired at the Pentagon in 1998 as a master gunnery sergeant.

I was 16 years old in 1999 when I began running cross country in high school. Dad unofficially became my coach. He woke me up at 6 a.m. on Saturdays to run at the nearby Naval Air Station Patuxent River or on the trails of St. Mary's College of Maryland. He showed up along the race course during my meets, and I'd find him at the top of a hill, cheering me on and yelling at me not to quit.

After a while, we entered local 5K and 10K races together. This was the true

reward of all of the work I was putting into running — the memorable running adventures with Dad. We'd leave the house together in his red Toyota pickup truck so early it was dark outside. He provided me with cold Gatorade, an old, gray Marine Corps sweatshirt, a red Marine Corps duffel bag, and a good pair of running shoes. He was full of running tips, and decent shoes were part of the deal. "Don't ever buy cheap shoes," he warned me.



I was 16 years old in 1999 when I began running cross country in high school.
DAD UNOFFICIALLY BECAME MY COACH.



I grew up in a Marine Corps house, where I recognized my dad as a man who wore camouflage or khaki, depending on where we were stationed. I can vividly remember watching him unlace his boots at night and unhook his green boot blousers. Just as vivid are my memories of seeing his running shoes on the porch and watching him walk in the back door breathless, but happy, after a run. I knew that the Marine Corps Marathon was special to him.

“Isn’t there a shorter race associated with the marathon?” I’d ask, hopefully, “Something like a 10K?” Dad would smile and shake his head.

“It’s 26.2 or nothing,” he’d answer.

I went on a running hiatus during my college years, but after I got my degree and moved back home, I picked it up again. I began dating my future husband, Scott, who happened to be a runner, which led to more races. The three of us ran the Jingle Bell 5K for arthritis, the 5K and 10K for hospice, and the Leatherneck 5K at Patuxent River.

... I COULD PICTURE MY DAD standing at the top, clapping and cheering me on...

Over time, Dad slowed down and began walking. The man who used to run in any kind of weather was getting older. His joints were tired, and his balance wasn’t reliable. Using a walking stick on his neighborhood jaunts, he still logged four to five miles a day, five times a week until the week he passed away at 71, in March 2021.

Meanwhile, I took another break from running while Scott and I raised three young kids. On a whim, I decided to run the Monument Avenue 10K in Richmond, VA, in April 2022. I quickly remembered how to run and really enjoyed the race. I started entering races again and fell back in love with running. Running helped me heal during the grieving process, and it helped me feel closer to Dad. During the Monument Avenue 10K, a runner zipped past me wearing a Team TAPS shirt. I wondered how it all worked. I wanted to honor Dad’s memory, but — having

been involved with TAPS for less than a year — I was still learning about all the opportunities.

It was at my local TAPS Care Group that someone suggested I run with Team TAPS in memory of Dad. I was thrilled to raise awareness for TAPS while doing something I already loved. Scott and I signed up together to run the Marine Corps Marathon 10K. The actual event was much more than a race. I found fellow Team TAPS runners — though meeting for the first time, we all felt like friends that day. Nearing the end of the race, just as I noticed the finish line was coming up after an uphill, I spotted a line of Marines to my left. Marching up the hill in camouflage and boots and carrying rucksacks, their encouraging words gave me the boost I needed to climb the final hill. In a crazy sort of way, I could picture my dad standing at the top, clapping and cheering me on, too.



Are you looking for a special way to honor your fallen loved one?
JOIN TEAM TAPS or apply for the Fallen Hero Match program, which connects your hero to a Team TAPS participant.

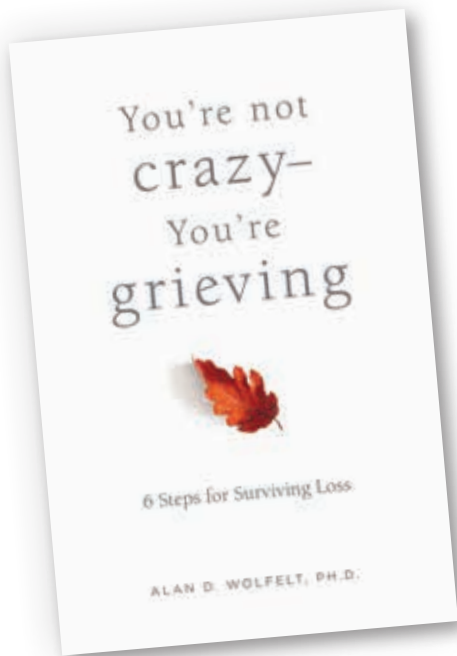
» taps.org/teamtaps

You're not crazy —

PART 3

Acknowledging the Illusion of Control

Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D. ★ TAPS Advisory Board



This article is part three in a series of six. Parts one and two can be found in the summer and fall 2023 issues of TAPS Magazine.

Death naturally throws thoughts, feelings, and behaviors into disarray. Nothing may feel “normal” right now. Your routines and schedules might be chaotic. You may often find yourself surprised at things you think, say, or do. Small things that you used to take in stride might now throw you off track. Everything may feel strange and off-kilter.

You're not crazy, though — you're grieving. Remember, early grief is a naturally out-of-

control time. And it is this loss of control that often makes people feel like they're going crazy.

I know it doesn't feel good to be out of control, though. Change and unpredictability stress our minds, bodies, and emotions. Any time we encounter something substantially different, we have to assess potential new dangers and figure out new responses. It is difficult being in new situations — especially those we don't want to be in. But the more we acknowledge that control is an illusion, the more comfortable we can become with the constant change and unpredictability of life.

Be compassionate with yourself as you go through this naturally out-of-control time, and acknowledge that we, as human beings, are not really in control of many essential aspects of our lives. When we work to cultivate more awareness that control is an illusion, we can start living with more ease and joy.

Saying Hello to the Crazy

People typically wish they could take shortcuts around grief. Almost immediately after a death, there's talk of “saying goodbye,” “closure,” and “moving on.”

The trouble is, that's not at all how it works. We actually have to say hello to all the new experiences of grief before we can even begin to think about saying goodbye. If you're in early grief, you're still in this hello phase.

One of the big things we have to say hello to is feeling out of control. Because, in early grief, being out of control is normal and necessary. Recognizing and acknowledging this is key.

If you've been feeling the craziness of being out of control or not yourself, you're actually doing what you need to be doing. “This is crazy,” you might think on any given day. Or, “I feel like I'm going crazy.” But now you know to counter with, “Oh, I see. The crazy is normal. Hello, crazy.”

Acknowledging Helplessness

Individual human beings are largely helpless when it comes to matters of life and death. This is perhaps the most devastating reality of being human.

We like to pretend otherwise. Many people have been taught the concept of “rugged individualism.” It goes something like this: I control my own destiny. I can be and do whatever I want. When things don't go my way, it's my fault because I didn't try hard enough. I can fix everything through effort and will.

Yes, of course, individual effort in life does make a difference, but circumstances beyond our control are always an influence. For the most part, we can't control who gets sick. We can't control accidents. We can't control natural disasters. We can't control many financial upheavals. And we can't control what other people do.

**You were powerless to prevent the death of the person you love,
and now you are helpless in the midst of your early grief.**

You're grieving

You were powerless to prevent the death of the person you love, and now you are helpless in the midst of your early grief. Your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors may seem wildly different from what they normally are, and you are helpless to control them. That's OK. Trust that your grief is doing what it needs to do.

The Experience of Denial

In early grief, denial can follow shock and numbness. It takes a while for the mind to understand and process the reality of what has happened. In the meantime, you are living in that bubble of shock and numbness. This is normal.

As the weeks pass, though, you might find yourself moving out of shock and into denial. Denial is a more conscious, active blocking of reality compared to shock and numbness.

Denial is a form of attempted control. If you can deny that something has happened, you're controlling your perceived reality. You're not actually changing the reality, however. So while intermittent denial in the first weeks and months can be normal, long-term denial will inhibit your healing and ongoing life.

As you move through your early grief, taking baby steps out of any denial you may be experiencing and into reality is an essential part of the process. When you talk openly about the death, share stories of your loss and relationship with the person who died, and participate in a meaningful ceremony, you are helping to soften denial.

The Out-of-Control Experiences of Early Grief

People in early grief often feel themselves behaving in what can feel like out-of-control ways. Here are several of the most common.

» Crying/Sobbing/Screaming

Tears in grief are normal, of course, and gentle tears are considered socially acceptable. We expect grieving people to cry, and in return, we offer condolences and comfort — up to a point. But when crying seems out of control, we frequently don't know what to do. We often judge loud, messy crying as hysterical behavior.

In Eastern cultures, sobbing and wailing (sometimes called "keening") are encouraged and understood as a normal part of grief and mourning. In our culture more broadly, however, sobbing and wailing are often seen as evidence of mental instability (i.e., craziness).





These shifts might be small or dramatic. They can be caused by anything — a familiar place, a song, an insensitive comment, a change in the weather, or nothing at all.

Mood changes can make you feel like you're going crazy because your inappropriate self-expectation may be that you should be constantly progressing from chaos to stability. You might think that you should follow a pattern of continuous "improvement" in grief. In other words, you may expect yourself to keep feeling better and better as time passes. Or, for one predominant feeling to be "over" when you move on to the next feeling.

The reality is, though, that grief twists and turns like a mountainous trail with a million loops and switchbacks. One minute you might be feeling great and the next horrible. One day you might be feeling sad and the next wildly angry — only to feel deeply sad again the next day.

And in general, grief usually gets worse before it gets better. As the Novocain of shock and numbness wears off and heart understanding grows, the pain often intensifies for a time.

So, if you are having normal ups and downs and wild swings, don't be hard on yourself. Instead, practice patience and self-compassion. Allow your moods to come and go without self-judgment. It can be hard to think rationally when your emotions are volatile, but try to remind yourself that your moodiness is normal. All your emotions belong.

If you're not crying, you might still be experiencing shock and numbness. Or you might not be crying because you are avoiding things that remind you of the significance of your loss. Some people have also taught me they fear if they start crying they may never stop. All these responses are normal in early grief.

But, when you are in early grief, of course you're appropriately unstable! That's the entire point! You are naturally shattered and thus out of control. And it is this very loss of control that allows you to authentically express your strong, primal feelings.

And what if you're not crying? This is also common. Sometimes people ask me, "Why am I not crying? What is wrong with me?" The lack of tears often makes these people think they're crazy — but of course, they're not.

Finally, you might not be a crier. It is possible to hurt deeply without crying. If this is the case for you, I encourage you to explore whether you're truly not a crier or you've been socially conditioned not to express emotion because tears are seen as vulnerability and weakness. If it's the latter, this is something you can work on.

» Moodiness

When someone you love dies, you may feel like you are surviving fairly well one minute and crazy with emotion the next. Sudden mood changes can be a difficult, yet normal part of your grief journey.

» Pain

Early grief hurts so much, especially when the shock and numbness start to wear off. The hurt is usually in proportion to the level of attachment you had to the person who died, though many other factors also come into play. In general, the stronger



TAPS supports you through all of grief's phases — including the intense feelings Dr. Wolfelt describes in this article. Scan the QR code to connect with a local TAPS Care Group or to request help finding a grief counselor in your area.

[»» taps.org/griefcounseling](https://taps.org/griefcounseling)

Grief pain is an alarm bell signaling that there is work to be done.

It's grief work. It's mourning.

the love and the closer the day-to-day relationship, the more painful the grief.

For many people in early grief, the pain feels out of control. It is more powerful than they are. It is like an earthquake, tornado, or tsunami — gigantic, terrible, and crushing.

Pain in grief has a purpose, just like bodily pain. Pain in your body signals that something is wrong and that care and rest are needed. If your inflamed appendix didn't use pain to alert you to the problem, your appendix would burst, and you might well die.

Similarly, the pain of your grief signals that something is wrong, and you need care and rest. Loss is a wound, and wounds hurt. Your pain announces your loss. It says, "Acknowledge me! Pay attention to me! Care for me!"

Since the death, your pain has probably forced you to slow down. It's caused you to turn inward and ponder your love for and relationship with the person who died. It's made you think about the meaning of life and death, who you are, what and who you care about, and what you want to do with the remainder of your days.

Your pain is also directing you to take good care of yourself and accept the care of others.

While we're at it, let's look at the alternative. What if loss didn't hurt? Imagine if we could fiercely love someone who was living, yet when they died, we experienced no pain. Instead, we just shrugged and moved on. Could that really be love? I don't think so.

The capacity to give and receive love — our greatest gift — is here and now. When the object of our love is gone, there is an after. In the after, our love continues, but it needs to find new ways of being. And adjusting to the after is what hurts.

Grief pain is an alarm bell signaling that there is work to be done. It's grief work. It's mourning. The adjusting and healing in the after don't just happen. They take attention, time, effort, and devotion. Just like the love did.

The pain of your early grief may feel crazy, but actually, it is good and true. The more you learn to befriend it, the more you will see that it is there to help you adapt to the new reality and find ways to continue to live and love well in the future.



About the Author

Dr. Alan Wolfelt is recognized as one of North America's leading death educators and grief counselors. His books on grief for both caregivers and grieving people — including You're Not Crazy—You're Grieving, from which this article series is adapted — have sold more than a million copies worldwide and are translated into many languages. He is the founder and director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition and a TAPS Advisory Board member. Learn more about his work at centerforloss.com.

PHOTOS: TAPS ARCHIVES; DR. ALAN D. WOLFELT



He is in the *Wind*

Matt Davison ★ U.S. Air Force Veteran

I don't recall the moment it happened. I only know that one minute I was in an intense firefight, and in a flash, I was hovering over the noise and chaos.

Later, I watched, disconnected, as a steel casket draped with an American flag was loaded on board a transport aircraft. I knew I was not in that casket, and that I needed to be home, with her.

I needed her to know I was OK, that there was no pain, and that I was at peace. I couldn't wipe away her tears as she cried out my name. And at the funeral, my hand softly touched her hair in the wind, as she was presented the flag, fixing her gaze upon the ground.

I wanted to tell her not to be sad. I wanted her to know I would never leave her. I wanted her to know that there is no death, and that the spirit lives eternal in the wind... in the beauty of nature.

On the day she went to The Wall, I went with her. She left a letter near my panel. It was a beautiful tribute to what once was ours. It was supposed to rain that day, but the sun shone, and it was a glorious day.

As she was leaving The Wall, I whispered, "I love you." She turned, and faced The Wall one last time. Then she walked away with the wind at her back.

HEALING IS IN SESSION

Emily Muñoz ✨ Surviving Spouse of CPT Gilbert Muñoz, U.S. Army ✨ Director, TAPS Program Innovation

I've had a song in my head since last November. It's an old Van Morrison song that stays for a week or so, then floats away — until it comes back again some days later, always nudging me with the same line, "...and the healing has begun." It just will not let me go.

Usually, when I have a prolonged earworm like that, there's a reason — or at least a trigger. Sometimes it's a musical phrase (there was a commercial for a ski resort in Massachusetts that had the same several-

note pattern as The Doobie Brothers' song, "Listen to the Music," which plagued me for an entire winter). Sometimes there's something deeper — like the summer I had "Killing Me Softly" in my head for weeks when I needed to change the dynamics in a relationship. This time, the melody and lyrics to this old Van Morrison song keep coming to me because, I suspect, I'm increasingly called to interrogate it. What kind of healing, exactly, has started, Mr. Morrison? What did it take to begin it? How did you know it was happening? Is it still?

Let's be clear, Van's lyrics do not get that deep — there wasn't even a strange internet theory about a deeper meaning to be found (a complete anomaly). The only unsourced, unsubstantiated statement I found was this: "Well, it's about healing, isn't it?"

UNDERSTANDING HEALING

So it seems, these lyrics are nothing but a strangely comforting refrain framing my persistent chorus of questions: If healing is painful, how do we know it's right, or if it's

Our pain and discomfort are **SENDING US A MESSAGE** — a sort of check engine light — that it may not be safe or wise to ignore.





working? Do we have to “stop the bleeding” before we can start to heal and, if so, what does that mean for grief, which feels like being constantly reinjured? Is it wrong to even expect healing from grief?

After all, grief isn't a disease or a disorder. It's a normal, healthy, required process. But, it's painful, so we associate it with a need for healing — maybe because it hurts so much or because it affects our ability to function in the world.

Maybe we default to the term, healing, because we know something needs to be addressed. Our pain and discomfort are sending us a message — a sort of check engine light — that it may not be safe or wise to ignore.

Though many of us might admit to ignoring that check engine light as long as possible, we know we need to tend to it. And, so it is with grief — we have not only an imperative to heal, but an imperative to help others heal. Mentally, physically, and emotionally, for survival, we are wired for both attachment and repair. Investment in our own healing, and that of others, is part of how we form connections — it's part of human evolutionary psychology. It's not easy, and it's not always comfortable. Jeanne Achterberg, a pioneer in psychology and alternative medicine, sums it up: “Healing is embracing what is most feared; healing is opening what has been closed, softening what has hardened into obstruction, healing is learning to trust life.”

HEALING IS LEARNING

Early in my grief, I was reading a book on basic neuroscience and, somewhere in

the chapter on how we acquire knowledge and skills, it clicked for me: My brain was desperately trying to learn a new reality. Isn't it true that books go much quicker when you read them a second time; movies seem to become shorter; tasks that once required so much mental effort become easier with repetition and practice.

In many ways, we “practice” our relationships with our loved ones the entire time they're in our lives. Our brains keep track of these important relationships very closely along three dimensions based on space, time, and the depth of the connection. In fact, in the human brain, a large number of neurons have been dedicated to this process — to creating neural maps that reassure us, provide context for our lives with the people we love, and to help us learn routines.

If you've seen the movie *50 First Dates*, this will make sense almost immediately. The main character, having suffered a traumatic brain injury, has no long-term memory. For her, every day is a completely new day. She must relearn the circumstances of her life for the first time every morning with no frame of reference. She cannot establish the brain patterns that help life flow more easily — with fewer shocking surprises, less uncertainty, and more context for what to expect. She doesn't have the rich neural maps of predictable routines, recognizable presences, and familiar feels — without them, she must repeatedly relearn her post-accident life from the ground up.

Death doesn't erase neural maps. They still exist, and this is why life in the wake of loss is, in many ways, a drastic rewiring process. The machinery dedicated to keeping track of our relationships keeps going.

The GPS keeps telling us where to go, but the maps are out of date.

Our brains are struggling to make sense of where we are and where we're going, and a tremendous amount of machinery has been dedicated to these processes. We can't just download an update, though — we must create new maps. It's a painful, painstaking process of rewiring. We must learn by going where we need to go and creating a path where there is none.

Mary Frances O'Connor explains in her book, *The Grieving Brain: The Surprising Science of How We Learn from Love and Loss*:

“Grief is a heart-wrenchingly painful problem for the brain to solve, and grieving necessitates learning to live in the world with the absence of someone you love deeply, who is ingrained in your understanding of the world. This means that for the brain, your loved one is simultaneously gone and also everlasting, and you are walking through two worlds at the same time.”

At a basic level, Dr. O'Connor says, we are reprogramming every aspect of daily life that involved our deceased loved ones. In the broadest sense, though, we are learning how to restore and redefine meaning, context, and identity.

We are all, then, reluctant students of life after loss. While this learning process seems daunting and exhausting, there are several profoundly comforting points here. First, our loved ones are permanently encoded in the very basis of who we are, how we think, and what we feel. In this way, they are eternal. This is independent of any of our own actions. So, relax.

You will never outgrow them, forget about them, or have to work to keep them present. This is what makes this learning process so difficult — we can't drive it, control it, rush it, or "work ahead." But the same processes that helped us make our loved ones a part of our lives will help us create lives with them still in it, just differently.

Second, we are invited to throw out the old maps and discard outmoded measures. We can release any standards that focus on returns to "before" because there is no need. You are carrying forward the person you are, all the versions of who you were, and all the versions of your loved one that you knew with you in your most basic human wiring. Adapting to life in a changed world is a learning process, not a returning process.

As Megan Devine, author of *It's OK That You're Not OK: Meeting Grief and Loss in a Culture That Doesn't Understand*, asked her Instagram followers, "What if healing isn't about being fixed; what if it's about integration? What if healing means being witnessed for the reality of your situation?"

And that's why we're here, doing it together. We are all students of love; we are all also students of grief. With the right social supports (ahem, #TAPSFAM), we can be who we have been and who we're becoming without the pressure to reconcile these things immediately. Together, we know that we can remember the love (in fact, we are physiologically unable to forget it), celebrate the enduring connections we have with our loved ones, and share the journey as we learn to integrate ourselves, our people, our aches, and the songs and loves that won't us let go.



About the Author

Emily Muñoz is the Program Innovation Director at TAPS. She brings fresh concepts to the Survivor Care Team and supports the Programs Committee, facilitating activities that offer a healthy, active path toward healing. Emily came to TAPS following the death of her husband in 2005.

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“And we’ll walk down the avenue again
And we’ll sing all the songs from way back when, yeah
And we’ll walk down the avenue again and the HEALING HAS BEGUN.”
– Van Morrison



PHOTO: TAPS ARCHIVES

Turn to the TAPS Institute for Hope and Healing® to get to know your grief and gain strength for your journey toward healing. Register for an upcoming webinar or browse the archives for courses that fit your needs.

>> taps.org/institute



TAPS.ORG/PROGRAMS-SERVICES

For the Loved Ones of Those Who Served and Died

TAPS®

TRAGEDY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM FOR SURVIVORS

PROGRAMS AND SERVICES



TAPS NATIONAL MILITARY SURVIVOR HELPLINE • 800-959-TAPS (8277)

A caring network of peer professionals is standing by to provide emotional support, connection to resources and programs, a listening ear, and open access to all that TAPS provides. Survivors can call any time, day or night. We always answer, we always have time, and we always care.



PEER-BASED EMOTIONAL SUPPORT • TAPS.ORG/PEERMENTORS

At TAPS, survivors help survivors heal. Survivors at least 18 months out from their loss can receive training and join our national network of Peer Mentors. Newly bereaved survivors are closely matched with a Peer Mentor based on manner of loss and relationship to their loved one to help them navigate their unique needs in the aftermath of loss.



COMMUNITY-BASED GRIEF SUPPORT • TAPS.ORG/GRIEFCOUNSELING

The right mental health or grief professional can guide military survivors to discover their strengths, develop coping skills, navigate relationships, and explore secondary losses. TAPS carefully connects survivors to the right mental health professional, trauma resources, and support groups, all within their local community.



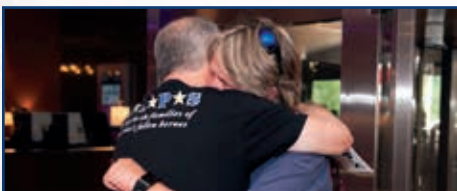
CASEWORK ASSISTANCE • TAPS.ORG/CASEWORK

Our casework team provides compassionate, customized support to surviving families in alignment with TAPS partners and third-party resources. Caseworkers can connect survivors to pro-bono legal assistance, emergency financial resources, state and federal benefit information, and private social-services support to guide families toward long-term stability and self-sufficiency.



EDUCATION SUPPORT SERVICES • TAPS.ORG/EDU

TAPS Education Support Services empowers survivors in pursuit of postsecondary education by connecting them to benefits, resources, and scholarship information that meet their financial needs and educational goals.



SURVIVOR CARE TEAM • TAPS.ORG/SURVIVORCARETEAM

Survivor Care Team members are surviving military family members with extensive professional training in peer-based support, traumatic death, suicide prevention and postvention, and grief support. These skilled listeners assess the needs of the newly bereaved, create safe spaces for sharing, and empower the pursuit of the healthy coping skills and long-term support systems TAPS can provide.



SUICIDE-LOSS SUPPORT • TAPS.ORG/SUICIDE

Death by suicide can leave behind a wake of powerful, complicated emotions and questions that shape a unique grief journey. TAPS provides compassionate support and hope for all suicide-loss survivors and safe spaces to honor and grieve. Survivors are gently guided toward a path of healthy grieving, healing, and growth.

PHOTOS: TAPS ARCHIVES; ISTOCKPHOTO.COM/GOLIBO/SJI PRODUCTIONS/INSIDE CREATIVE HOUSE; MIKE NOWAK/LOS ANGELES CHARGERS

ILLNESS-LOSS SUPPORT • [TAPS.ORG/CAREGIVER](https://taps.org/caregiver)

TAPS ensures families whose loved one died from illness are recognized, cared for, and aware of pertinent benefits. We advocate for improvements in caregiver support and raise critical awareness about the unique needs and situations of military caregiving families, including the effects of toxic exposure. TAPS also provides healing peer connections and programs that support healthy next steps for caregiving survivors.



ONLINE COMMUNITY • [TAPS.ORG/ONLINECOMMUNITY](https://taps.org/onlinecommunity)

Our online community brings the meaningful connections of TAPS directly to survivors, wherever they are. Online groups are peer-led, facilitated sessions where there's never pressure to share, but always an opportunity. TAPS workshops and online series build supportive communities that learn and process new information together and create space to share perspectives in an effort to find inspiration, clarity, and connection.



WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT • [TAPS.ORG/EMPOWERMENT](https://taps.org/empowerment)

TAPS Women's Empowerment programming provides surviving women with the tools and confidence to shape their identity, spirituality, and goal setting in their lives after loss. A combination of in-person and online events foster a vibrant, compassionate community where participants treasure opportunities to be each other's teachers, confidants, cheerleaders, and friends.



MEN'S PROGRAM • [TAPS.ORG/MEN](https://taps.org/men)

The TAPS Men's Program was designed by men, for men. It paves the way for men to grieve their way, at their own pace. Surviving men lean on each other, share perspectives, grow stronger by elevating one another, and honor the legacy of their military and veteran loved ones.



YOUTH PROGRAMS • [TAPS.ORG/YOUTHPROGRAMS](https://taps.org/youthprograms)

Though their lives are impacted by grief, young TAPS survivors know their lives will also be marked by camaraderie, mentorship, emotional maturity, adventure, and fun. TAPS Youth Programs — led by experts in child development, children's grief and loss, mental health, and education — provide safe spaces for surviving military children (ages 5-18) to explore grief and embrace healing at Good Grief Camps and Family Camps. Online programming is also available for parents and guardians of grieving children.



YOUNG ADULTS PROGRAM • [TAPS.ORG/YOUNGADULTS](https://taps.org/youngadults)

Five pillars of growth — Personal Development, Financial Stability, Communication, Career Development, and Service to Others — guide military survivors, ages 18-30, as they grow with their grief. Through in-person, multi-day experiences, and online group discussions, young adult survivors connect and engage with others to create a well-rounded life full of hope, healing, and growth.



TAPS INSTITUTE FOR HOPE AND HEALING® • [TAPS.ORG/INSTITUTE](https://taps.org/institute)

The TAPS Institute for Hope and Healing® is a leader in training and education for grief professionals and bereaved individuals and families. The institute provides no-cost grief and bereavement programming through webinars, webcasts, and other events on a variety of topics, such as understanding and responding to suicide; children's grief; coping with loss; wellness workshops; and preserving memories of lost loved ones. Professionals can access academic programs and a wide range of continuing education credits.



SPORTS AND ENTERTAINMENT • [TAPS.ORG/ENTERTAINMENT](https://taps.org/entertainment)

Stars4TAPS and teams4taps collaborate with the entertainment industry and sports organizations across the country and in the U.K. to bring joy, healing, and incredible memories to surviving military families as they honor their fallen heroes.



Gather, Heal, Grow Together



30TH ANNUAL NATIONAL MILITARY SURVIVOR SEMINAR AND GOOD GRIEF CAMP

**MEMORIAL DAY WEEKEND
MAY 23 – 27**

Arlington, Virginia ★ Crystal Gateway Marriott

This Memorial Day weekend, as Americans across the country pause to honor the brave few who sacrificed for our nation's freedom and safety, TAPS will host our two annual events together in Arlington, VA, to mark our 30th anniversary. Together, we will grow with our grief, share our stories, and honor the heroes whose losses brought us together.

The seminar is open to military and veteran survivors of all ages, types of loss, and relationships to the fallen. Whether you are new to loss or you've walked with your grief for some time, you will be welcomed by a compassionate team of peer support and grief and trauma experts. TAPS provides healing programming for adults, young adults, children, and teens, and child care for children ages 5 years old and under who are not yet attending kindergarten.

You will have the opportunity to choose specialized programming, participate in Memorial Day events, and enjoy our famous TAPS Grand Banquet featuring Chef Robert Irvine. We look forward to sharing this meaningful holiday with you.



Scan the QR code to register and learn more about the weekend's itinerary and presenters.

taps.org/national

#HonorThem



EVENTS

MORE OPPORTUNITIES TO JOIN TAPS

Scan the QR code to find and register for any of our upcoming events. Be sure to check back often for updates. New events are added throughout the year.



[» taps.org/events](https://taps.org/events)

TAPS Care Groups and TAPS Togethers bring the comfort of TAPS to your local community with meetings and events happening all throughout the year. Find a group or upcoming event near you by scanning the QR codes.



[» taps.org/tapstogethers](https://taps.org/tapstogethers)



[» taps.org/caregroups](https://taps.org/caregroups)

REGIONAL SEMINARS, CAMPS & EXPERIENCES

JUNE 5-9

WIDOWS, FIANCEES,
AND SIGNIFICANT OTHERS
WOMEN'S RETREAT
Eagle River, Alaska

AUGUST 23-25

NORTHEAST REGIONAL
MILITARY SURVIVOR SEMINAR
AND GOOD GRIEF CAMP
Buffalo, New York

JULY 10-14

YOUNG ADULTS RETREAT
Lake of the Ozarks, Missouri

OCTOBER 4-6

SOUTHERN REGIONAL
MILITARY SURVIVOR SEMINAR
AND GOOD GRIEF CAMP
San Antonio, Texas

JULY 24-28

MEN'S RETREAT
Lake of the Ozarks, Missouri

OCTOBER 16-20

SIBLINGS RETREAT
Lake of the Ozarks, Missouri

JULY 26-28

WESTERN REGIONAL
MILITARY SURVIVOR SEMINAR
AND GOOD GRIEF CAMP
Scottsdale, Arizona

NOVEMBER 15-17

SOUTHEAST REGIONAL
MILITARY SURVIVOR SEMINAR
AND GOOD GRIEF CAMP
Destin, Florida

[» Visit taps.org/events for more events](https://taps.org/events)

PHOTOS: TAPS ARCHIVES



Remember the Love ☆ Celebrate the Life ☆ Share the Journey

THE LEGACY LIVES ON

Kristi Stolzenberg ✨ Editor, *TAPS Magazine*

Ashlynn Haycock-Lohmann is in her element walking the halls of Congress. The echoes of advocacy, the rushed click-clack of heels on the marble floors, and the hush that sweeps the room as a committee hearing comes to order — she answers it all with a steady hand. For Ashlynn, these are the sounds of progress for military and veteran survivors — progress she personally knows is necessary, progress that became her why years ago, and progress she will continue to pursue on behalf of her fellow military and veteran survivors and those who will one day walk their path.

On Jan. 30, 2024, Ashlynn sat shoulder-to-shoulder with fellow witnesses before the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs as she opened her oral testimony, "I am the Gold Star Daughter of United States Army Sergeant First Class Jeffrey Haycock, who died while training to deploy in 2002, and Air Force Veteran Nichole Haycock, who died by suicide in 2011. I personally understand how life-changing our VA benefits are to our surviving families."

With her characteristic confidence, Ashlynn proceeded to outline obstacles that often lie between a surviving family and the benefits they earned when their loved one, who proudly volunteered to serve this nation, died.

The strength of the four witnesses — including Ashlynn, on behalf of TAPS — was apparent to everyone present. Ranking Member Takano captured the sentiment in this statement to the witness panel, "Your resilience is inspiring, and I'm also inspired by your courage. You're all leaders in your own way — making meaning out of the loss of your loved one by taking up this cause."

This moment — acting as a voice for the survivor community after persevering through the losses of both of her parents

and being truly heard by lawmakers and citizens — would be an accomplished ending to Ashlynn's story of finding meaning after loss, but she has no plans to slow her pace. This moment, instead, could make for a dramatic beginning to her journey after loss, but she found her footing years earlier thanks to TAPS. No, this moment is somewhere in the middle

of Ashlynn's story. From her early days as a Good Grief Camper to becoming a respected advocate for survivors on Capitol Hill, Ashlynn embodies the precious task of being the living legacy for both her father and mother, and somewhere along the way, she began to weave a legacy for the survivor community that is all her own.





FINDING HER PLACE LIVING THE LEGACY

Ashlynnne was just 10 years old when her father died on April 12, 2002. By Memorial Day weekend the following month, she reluctantly showed up to her first TAPS Good Grief Camp, only after getting her mom to agree that if she and her brothers truly hated it, they would never have to go back.

She didn't hate it.

She admitted later that Good Grief Camp was one of the best things to happen to her, "For the first time since my dad died, I was not the 'weird kid with the dead dad.' I was normal. No one looked at me like I was crazy; no one avoided me because they didn't know what to say."

Ashlynnne faced her new title of surviving daughter with the strength she drew from her new TAPS Family, and she returned home from that first healing weekend able to honor the memory of her father — the man who danced in the kitchen, served 17 years in the military, ensured she knew all 50 states before kindergarten, and taught her to prioritize education. With TAPS, she learned to grow with grief in one hand and gratitude in the other.

EMBRACING HER LEGACY

In the time between her first Good Grief Camp in 2002 to graduating high school in 2009, Ashlynnne and her family were regulars at TAPS events. But, by age 15 or 16, Ashlynnne — ever her father's daughter with a heart for service — was anxious to give back to the organization that had given her so much. She recalled begging Bonnie Carroll, TAPS Founder and President, to be a mentor to young Good Grief Campers. After graduating high school, she got that chance, "Mentoring young survivors was incredibly healing for both parties," Ashlynnne shared, "It was the natural next step in healing — passing on that support TAPS showed me the first time I walked into camp and every day since."

Carrying what she'd learned from her dad, Ashlynnne continued to learn from her mother, Nichole, the importance of making the places and processes around her better than she found them. Through navigating her own survivor benefits, Nichole assumed, like so many surviving spouses, that her family would be taken care of financially if something ever happened to Jeffrey. But, as Ashlynnne shared in a 2019 op-ed for *The Oklahoman*, the "Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs of \$1,200 per month [was] nowhere close to my dad's salary..." To supplement this, Nichole was also eligible to receive Jeffrey's retirement benefits and Survivor Benefit Plan (SBP). "Initially," Ashlynnne went on to write, "my mom was under the impression we would receive both

the DIC and SBP payments, only to learn later that for every dollar we received in DIC, we [lost] a dollar in SBP." This has long been referred to as the Widow's Tax within the survivor community. Ashlynnne's mom was not about to leave this for the next family to deal with. She leaned in, learned, and advocated on Capitol Hill with Ashlynnne in tow.

Today, Ashlynnne points to this time in her life as the beginning of her love for policy and advocacy — walking the halls of the Capitol alongside her mom, fighting for survivor benefits. The paths of higher education, a nod to her dad's legacy, and advocacy, a passion ignited alongside her mom, met in D.C. when Ashlynnne was accepted at American University in 2009.

Thriving in college and at TAPS — no doubt making her father proud by balancing education and service, Ashlynnne recalled a bittersweet TAPS moment from 2011 when she and her mom dressed up to attend the TAPS Honor Guard Gala. They proudly honored her father that night, but it was the last time Ashlynnne saw her mom. Two weeks later, Nichole — Air Force veteran, loving mother of three, and fierce champion for survivor benefits died by suicide. Ashlynnne, by then a college sophomore, faced another sudden, heartbreaking loss and found herself navigating the murky waters of adulthood, survivor benefits, and college expenses on her own.

Fearing she would have to drop out of college, she did what her mother had always done when she needed support, she called Bonnie.

THE LEGACY LIVES ON

Ashlynnne did, indeed, graduate on time and debt-free — thanks to TAPS and her own drive to succeed. But, she saw firsthand the need for a singular resource for survivors seeking higher education funding and benefits. So, Ashlynnne returned to TAPS — political science degree in hand — to do just as she'd seen her mother do anytime she met something that needed fixing: she fixed it.

As a member of the TAPS staff, Ashlynnne researched and compiled all the options for students. Her research built the TAPS education portal from the ground up, and she worked directly with the VA, states, and private organizations to maximize inclusivity for the survivor community. What began as a postgraduate research effort in 2013 bloomed into what is now TAPS Education Support Services, which in the last five years alone identified \$1.6 billion in education funding for survivors. Founding TAPS Education Support Services is one of Ashlynnne's proudest accomplishments for the survivor community — a well-balanced tribute to the priorities instilled in her by both her father and mother.

The other achievement Ashlynnne looks back on as one of her proudest was her part in the 2019 elimination of the Widow's Tax. Her love for advocacy was rooted in eliminating this legislation. Looking back, so much of her life stemmed from walking the halls of the Capitol with her mom, advocating for change. It lit a spark in Ashlynnne to make a career out of advocating for military and veteran survivors, and — after the death of her mom — she instinctively picked up where her mom left off and joined TAPS at the front of the charge fighting for the elimination of the Widow's Tax. "My mom poured so much time and energy into ending the Widow's Tax. It was a 20-year battle, and while she never got to see it through, I wanted to personally continue that fight in her memory," Ashlynnne shared.

Today, Ashlynnne continues to fight for survivors on the Hill as the TAPS Deputy Director of Government and Legislative Affairs; she's been an integral part of landmark legislation, including the



elimination of the Widow's Tax, passing the Forever GI Bill, and the ongoing appeal to pass the Love Lives On Act. Giving back to the survivor community that held her after the loss of her father and empowered her after the loss of her mother has become more than fulfilling her parents' legacies. It's become a legacy all her own. It is her ongoing passion to honor all surviving families equally and leave the survivor community better than she found it.

HONORING SERVICE IN ACTION

TAPS is proud to award Deputy Director of Government and Legislative Affairs Ashlynnne Haycock-Lohmann with the 2024 TAPS Senator Ted Stevens Leadership Award. She is not only the living legacy of her father and mother; she exemplifies the TAPS mission. Through her shining example and service to the survivor community, she carries her own legacy forward, forever changing the landscape of life after loss.

Together We Heal

Kristi Stolzenberg ★ Editor, *TAPS Magazine*

Kari Marine ★ Surviving Sibling of SGT Donald Marine, U.S. Army

It's become something of a tradition for Kari Marine, the surviving sister of veteran U.S. Army SGT Donald Marine, to gather with friends, family, and fellow survivors at the Highground Veterans Memorial Park. The park is a place of beauty and comfort for Kari because there is a bench there in the Persian Gulf Tribute that bears her brother's name. From a birdseye view, Donald's bench and the surrounding benches form a bootprint, which — among other things — is a metaphor for walking with you (whether service member, veteran, or survivor), not past you. And, appropriately enough, it was at Kari's annual TAPS Togethers gathering at the Highground on Sept. 9, 2023, that she got to know a surviving father, Jim Johnson, and, taking a nod from the bootprint, she walked with him for a while.

Jim traveled to Kari's gathering in Neillsville, WI, all the way from Chicago — more than five hours away. He was accompanied by two lifelong friends, one of whom flew from California specifically for this event. While TAPS Togethers, at their core, are events intended to bring survivors in a local area together, it became clear that this event was something much larger (and geographically sweeping) for Jim. With his

two friends by his side and members of his TAPS community present, Jim saw his son's honor stone for the first time that day.

The stone was purchased by several of Jim's friends in honor of his son, U.S. Air Force Senior Airman Daniel Johnson, who died while serving in Afghanistan on Oct. 5, 2010. Kari shared that looking on while Jim saw his son's memorial stone for the first time was incredibly moving, and she was touched to be there for that moment.

Near the end of the gathering, after the group finished touring the park, Jim — half-jokingly — asked Kari if this story would be in *TAPS Magazine*.

And, of course, it is. Jim's story, Kari's story, Daniel's legacy, and Donald's legacy — they're all stories independent of each other, powerful in their own right. But, together, they are stronger — revealing the layers of hope, pride, and grief, and how they're all woven together in this moment. Just as Kari and Jim and the rest of the TAPS Togethers group walked with each other and not past each other that day, we will continue to support each other and share in the moments and milestones after loss because we know that it is together, we heal.



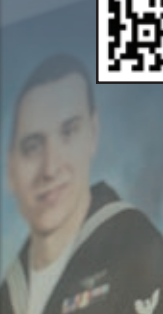
PHOTOS: TAPS ARCHIVES; KARI MARINE



TAPS TRIBUTE TILES

TAPS offers another special way to honor your fallen hero at the TAPS National Headquarters in Arlington, VA. You can purchase a Tribute Tile in one of four sizes, featuring your loved one's photo, name, and an inscription of your choice. Funds raised from these tiles support critical TAPS services for all those grieving a military or veteran loved one.

Kari plans to continue the powerful tradition of hosting this TAPS Togethers gathering each fall, and she welcomes anyone to join. Be sure to visit taps.org/tapstogethers throughout the year for this event and others like it happening near you.



*In honor of
our brilliant son, brother
Matthew we love you.*



Raising Bereaved Children

Andy McNiel, M.A. ✧ Senior Advisor, TAPS Youth Programs

When a military spouse or partner dies, the surviving family members — including the children — face challenges. The family may have to relocate, thus losing a community of support; the surviving spouse or partner becomes the only parent to their children; and everyone in the family experiences grief in their own way, often isolating from one another. Surviving parents often struggle with how to connect with their children, how to effectively discipline their children, and how to help themselves and their children in their grief.

The reality is that we cannot do everything at once. When we are grieving, we only have so much energy to give. As your family grieves and you all find your footing again after loss, consider a place to start building a new normal. At TAPS, we find it helpful to start by identifying, naming, and beginning to incorporate the things you all value as a family. With a poster board or large piece of paper and some markers, sit down with your children and come up with four or five values that you all can agree to prioritize. Make these a focus, and hold one another accountable to these values daily. To help you get started, we are sharing five values many surviving families have found helpful, even in the midst of grief.

Patience

This is a practice that takes time to develop. The more you practice taking a deep breath — reminding yourself that you are OK in that moment — and choosing your reaction

to a situation (rather than just reacting without any forethought), the more patient you will become. There is no doubt that many things in life can test our patience, and this is particularly true when we are grieving. Grief also takes time, and there are aspects of our grief that will continue to be with us throughout our lives. Focusing individually and as a family on being patient and in control of our actions and responses will help both you and your children live and even grow mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and socially while navigating grief.

Grace

Giving grace to yourself and others in the family is a keystone of healthy relationships. None of us is perfect, and sometimes grief adds to our frustrations or leads to outbursts, arguments, or misunderstandings. Being able to lead with grace, forgive one another, and reconcile differences goes a long way toward healing. It also builds an internal strength where we are in control of our choices. Grace is just as much an act of will as patience. And, in some ways, the two are connected. As we practice patience, we can better see what is behind a situation or a particular behavior and be better able to forgive that person, even as they are acting out.

Kindness

Practicing patience and grace often leads to kindness. Patience slows us down enough to think about how we react to a situation;

then, we choose our course of action. As we slow down in a situation, we can often lead with grace and choose a behavior that is kind. Kindness is not timid, nor is kindness weak. Kindness, when measured out with grace and patience, carries strength with it. We, as parents, can be consistent, firm, and resolved when we discipline our children, and we can show them kindness, patience, and grace. Kindness is also something that we can practice every day in our lives with our family, our friends, and with strangers. Kindness requires a mental shift from looking for our own good to thinking about what is good for others. Kindness is a gift you can give your children that they can incorporate into their own lives and extend to others. Kindness opens doors.

Responsibility

Accepting personal responsibility is an important trait to develop in your children that will serve them well throughout their lives. Being responsible involves telling the truth, being a good sport (win or lose), trying something again — even if it went wrong the first time, getting back up after a fall, owning mistakes, and asking for forgiveness when needed. Holding yourself and one another accountable, even when you are grieving, is important. Grief is often a reason why children (and adults) may have outbursts of anger or behave in ways that are not appropriate. Grief longs to be validated and should never be punished. Behavior, on the other hand, has to have consequences or children may grow up believing that they do not have to be responsible for their behavior.

When holding yourself or your children accountable for behavior and enacting a consequence (punishment), begin by acknowledging the grief that may be behind the behavior, saying something

like, “I see that you are angry, and I wonder if that is related to your grief over your [dad, mom, uncle, etc.]. It is OK to have these feelings — they are normal. However, it is not OK to [hit your sibling, talk back to your mother or father, be mean to your friend, not share, etc.]” This response separates the behavior from the grief reaction, validates the grief, and holds children accountable for their behavior. In this, we are teaching personal responsibility for our behaviors, no matter how we might be feeling on the inside.

Humor

We have all heard that laughter is the best medicine, and this can be true. Allowing humor, laughter, and fun into your home again after loss is important. This demonstrates — for you and your children — the need for balance in our lives. While it is important to lean into our grief and experience our pain as we adapt to our loss, it is also important to lean into life, living, and fun. Though it may be challenging, particularly early in our grief, laughter and humor can be a healing balm for your family. Children are better able to do this than teenagers and adults, yet humor is important to everyone, at any age. At first, you may feel guilty for laughing in the wake of your loss. This is normal. As you allow humor back into your life, though, you will see it impacts each family member’s outlook.

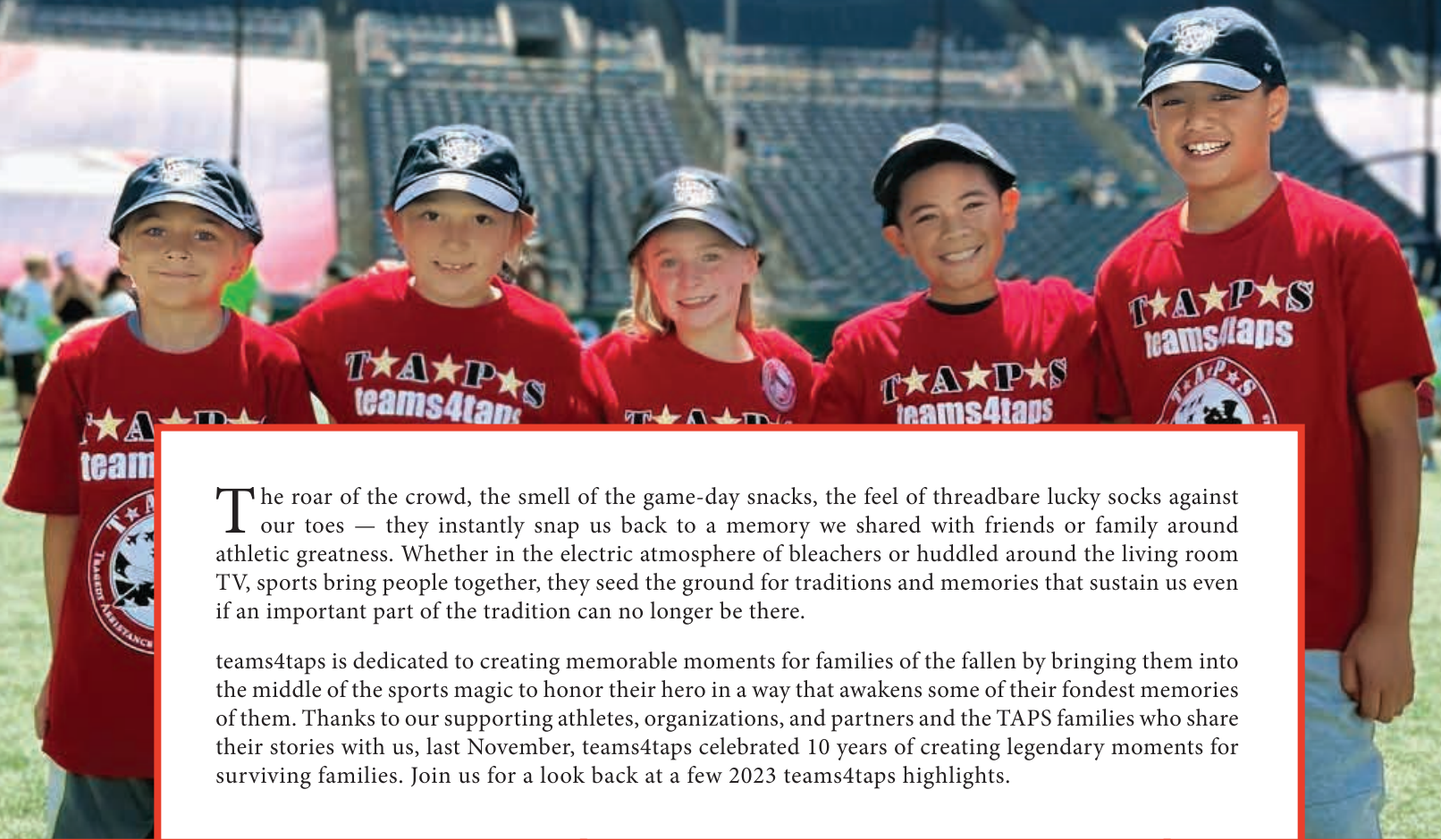
Grief takes time and there are aspects of grief that continue to be with us throughout our lives. Grief is not a problem we can fix. It is an experience we must live, no matter how painful. Yet, amid our grief, we do have choices. Identifying and establishing shared values that we can live within our home and in our community is important. These values can become the keystone on which personal growth, good character, and healthy development rest.



TAPS YOUTH PROGRAMS can support you and your children through grief with age-appropriate activities and plenty of opportunities to grow as a family while making memories together. Make plans to grow with us in 2024.

taps.org/youthprograms

For the Love of And the Memory of a Hero



The roar of the crowd, the smell of the game-day snacks, the feel of threadbare lucky socks against our toes — they instantly snap us back to a memory we shared with friends or family around athletic greatness. Whether in the electric atmosphere of bleachers or huddled around the living room TV, sports bring people together, they seed the ground for traditions and memories that sustain us even if an important part of the tradition can no longer be there.

teams4taps is dedicated to creating memorable moments for families of the fallen by bringing them into the middle of the sports magic to honor their hero in a way that awakens some of their fondest memories of them. Thanks to our supporting athletes, organizations, and partners and the TAPS families who share their stories with us, last November, teams4taps celebrated 10 years of creating legendary moments for surviving families. Join us for a look back at a few 2023 teams4taps highlights.



the Game



We want to hear your story. Scan the QR code to tell us about your fallen loved one's connection to a special athlete or favorite team.

taps.org/shareyourstory

GRIEF RECALL

Gregory T. Jacobs, TAPS Peer Mentor ✨ Surviving Father of SPC David M. Jacobs, U.S. Army

I recently had the privilege of taking my grandson, Thomas, to the Kentucky State Fair. Thomas is 5 and the son of my deceased son who served in the Army. While walking around looking at the animals and various venues, he was attracted to the police lights in the middle of the convention center — a Kentucky State Police cruiser display and recruitment booth. Next to the display was a trailer with a mangled-up car and a kiosk to promote safe driving. There it was!

Anyone going through grief knows that all-too-familiar feeling of a grief reminder. I turned to walk away from the trailer and saw a police helicopter on display — another reminder. I was trapped and felt helpless. Thomas grabbed my hand,

wanting to see the car; then he became intrigued with the helicopter. Inside I was dying. I didn't panic or allow much emotion to arise on my face, but — inside — it felt like a million fire ants were gnawing on me. I turned once again from the car, then the helicopter, and saw a uniformed soldier walking toward his recruitment booth. I froze — was this a cruel joke?

On Dec. 23, 2020, my first-born son, David M. Jacobs, was taken from me. He was involved in an auto accident 50 minutes after getting off work in Colorado Springs, outside of Fort Carson. He was a U.S. Army specialist and worked on Apache helicopters. His car was hit by another driver as they entered the interstate. David's car flipped, hit a light pole, and he was killed instantly.

The totaled car, the helicopter, and the uniformed soldier at the state fair were all painful reminders of my loss. They triggered an emotional response in me. These reminders or connections or triggers are not talked about much in everyday conversation because we would prefer not to find ourselves in these situations. We choose to safeguard hearts and emotions by not veering into their path whenever possible.

At first glance, you could not have known that a mangled-up car, helicopter, and soldier in uniform would necessarily be painful. Once I expounded on my story, though, it probably started to come into focus that David died in an auto accident, served in the Army, and worked on Apache helicopters, and my reaction likely makes more sense to you.

AT FIRST GLANCE, you could not have known that a mangled-up car, helicopter, and soldier in uniform would necessarily be painful.



Certain situations or items can bring us right back to our loss — like the car at the state fair — or reminders of the life that was lost — like the soldier and the helicopter. Triggers could be watching war movies, Memorial Day celebrations, U.S. flags, friends getting married, graduations, pictures of friends on social media, and nearly anything else. Unfortunately, we rarely discuss what might trigger us, so even well-meaning friends, family, perfect strangers, and everyday life can present painful moments. That would be a problem — an emotional endurance race, but in the years after David's loss, I've found two drastically different approaches to these situations.



COMFORT means that you just need them to hear you, and **COUNSEL** means that you are looking for their wisdom or advice.

AVOIDANCE

I have been taught that avoidance is not good, as grief will eventually arise to confront you head-on. I agree, if we are talking about the overall umbrella of grief. Still, I would counter that it is OK to avoid putting yourself in situations that you know you can't handle at a particular time or remove yourself from an upsetting situation you didn't anticipate, but find yourself in. If you don't think that you can handle a Memorial Day ceremony at the cemetery where your loved one is buried, then it is OK to sit that year out and reevaluate next year. Grant yourself that patience and grace.

OVERCOME YOUR FEARS

My whole life, I have had a fear of snakes. One time at a nature preserve, I held one to try to overcome my fear. Instead of avoiding every situation forever, I would

encourage you to work on overcoming your fear when you feel ready. As your grief journey develops down the road, you will find that what used to be a trigger just might not be any longer. I will never forget the sergeant handing my wife and me David's folded flag at the gravesite. For years after that, I would cringe at the sight of the United States flag. Now, I have a full-sized flag hanging in my office as a reminder of my son's sacrifice.

I acknowledge that I still struggle with seeing an ambulance, hearing sirens, watching helicopters flying over my house, and hearing my doorbell ring — fearing that it is the notification officer. These all have the power to bring me right back to my loss, and I work on them daily. But, just like picking up the snake, I am learning to either avoid certain situations or face the fear behind them.

You may be able to minimize difficult moments by talking through your grief triggers with those closest to you — those walking this journey alongside you — and clarifying whether you are seeking comfort or counsel. Comfort means that you just need them to hear you, and counsel means that you are looking for their wisdom or advice. They might or might not get it, and that is OK, but they care about you and would likely do anything they can to help you avoid or overcome difficult moments.

As grieving loved ones of those who served this country, our lives are forever changed. At the beginning of my grief journey, I never thought I could live again, but I am learning that I now have a new life — stronger in the midst of adversity and able to navigate the ways life reminds me of my loss. Be strong and courageous and know that you are not alone!

PHOTOS: TAPS ARCHIVES; GREGORY T. JACOBS



Whether you're a surviving father, like the author of this story, or any man grieving the loss of someone who served in the military, the **MEN'S PROGRAM** at TAPS welcomes you to grieve and grow your way alongside a support system of surviving men who understand. Scan the QR code to learn more about TAPS' online and in-person programming designed to support grieving men.

taps.org/men

A Mother's

Love

Kristi Stolzenberg ★ Editor, *TAPS Magazine*

Maria Gonzales ★ Surviving Mother of MSgt Martin L. Gonzales, U.S. Air Force Reserves

Pamela Wanga ★ Surviving Mother of CWO2 Victor J.O. Wanga, U.S. Marine Corps

In kindergarten, out of all the books and flashy trinkets at the school book fair, I used my money to purchase *Love You Forever* by Robert Munsch. If I had to guess, I was likely drawn to the toddler sitting in the middle of pure chaos of his own creation — thinking it was probably a hilarious book.

If you've ever read the book, you know that — while it has glimmers of humor that I now find relatable as a parent — the book tugs at your heartstrings more than it tickles your funny bone. It is a testament to the unconditional love a mother has for her child. Through each stage — sleepless nights with a newborn, mischievous toddler antics, rebellious teen years, and the day her baby, fully grown near the end of the story, leaves home — the mother sings, "I'll love you forever, like you for always, as long as I'm living, my baby you'll be."

A mother's love is unshakable and unending — even if a mother has to endure the pain of losing her child, the love remains. The love

is unique in that it isn't always obviously love — sometimes it manifests as lying awake worrying about your child, things you said, or things you didn't say. Sometimes it's pride, hanging an achievement on the refrigerator, telling and retelling favorite memories, or — for the mothers in our TAPS Family — mailing your son's or daughter's photos and stories to TAPS in hopes they will appear in print because no passage of time will lessen the love, ease the grief, or diminish the pride you still hold for them. They will, to paraphrase the story's refrain, always be your baby.

Over the last several months, I've had the privilege of getting to know two surviving mothers in the TAPS Family, Maria Gonzales and Pamela Wanga. These mothers — though they may have never met face to face — share the heartbreaking goal of ensuring the world remembers their sons, MSgt Martin L. Gonzales, U.S. Air Force, and CWO2 Victor J. O. Wanga, U.S. Marine Corps.

Operation Enduring Freedom. In October of 2006, Martin joined the Host Nation Rider Program as a Host Nation Rider Escort, which frequently called him aboard aircraft tasked with monitoring drug smugglers throughout SOUTHCOM. She proudly relayed as confidently as any U.S. Airman that Martin logged over 200 sorties and 2,000 flying hours in support of the counternarcotics mission that would eventually take his life. He was a critical part of SOUTHCOM's confiscation of 384 metric tons of illegal drugs, totaling roughly \$46.9 billion.

Martin left behind his loving wife, two young children, and a mother who never stopped being proud of his military service or the many milestones in his young life that led him there. I suspect her July 4th celebrations took on new meaning in 1974 when Martin was born, changing again on the first Independence Day he wore the U.S. Air Force uniform, and every Independence Day since his death fills her with immense pride and an annual surge of grief for the American hero she lost.

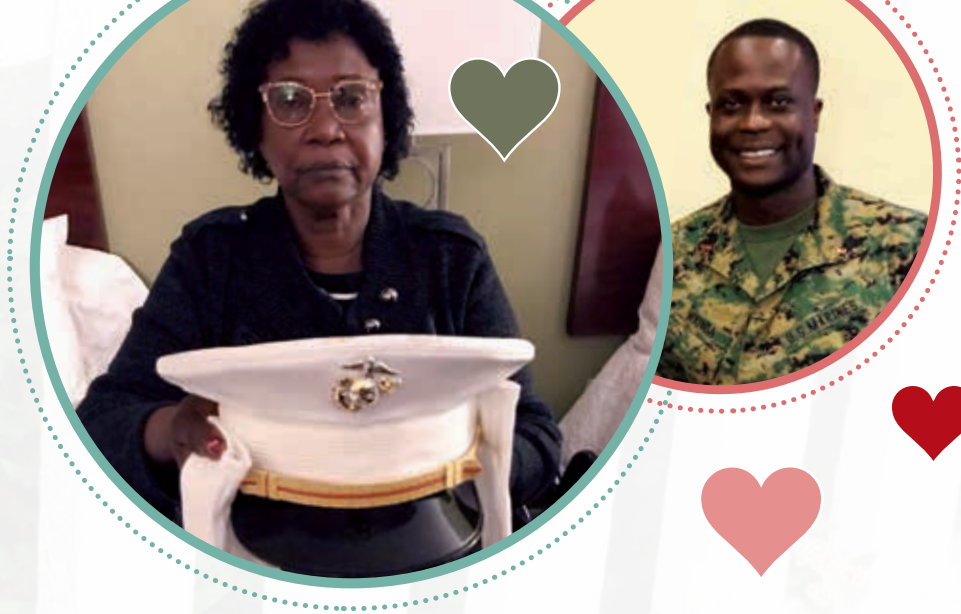
Maria and Martin

Maria's son, Martin, was born on July 4, 1974, which made his choice to serve in the U.S. military seem almost written in the stars. Maria's American hero was born on Independence Day and died on Oct. 5, 2013, in a plane crash near the Colombia-Panama border while conducting monitoring operations in support of Operation Martillo, a campaign targeting illicit trafficking under U.S. Southern Command.

Maria shared that Martin enlisted in the U.S. Air Force on Dec. 29, 1992, at the age of 18, later entering the Air Force Reserves in 1997, and mobilizing following 9/11 in support of

Martin's final mission, though critical, was quiet, likely unknown to many of us in the United States. The few local stories available on the mishap and his life share the same heartbreaking statement from his widow and the minimal details available immediately after his death. The last mention of MSgt Martin L. Gonzales in the news was Oct. 22, 2013, when his remains were returned to his family with full military honors. Though the nation is no longer reporting on the Gonzales family's loss, Martin's life, or the legacy he left behind 10 years later, Maria hasn't gone a day without thinking of him. She has never stopped reminding all who will listen that he was a hero and a loving son. And, although she can't wrap him up in her arms to tell him face-to-face, she will always be proud of him.





Pamela and Victor

Victor wasn't born in the United States — the country he would eventually call home and raise his right hand to promise to defend. He was born on May 1, 1985, in Nairobi, Kenya. Pamela eloquently shares that her healthy baby boy came into this world with a purpose in life. 1988 brought the Wanga family to the U.S. — Minnesota, to be specific. The years flew by, as they tend to do, and before Pamela knew it, Vic — as she affectionately calls him — and his twin brother graduated from high school in 2003. By May 2004, Vic was on his way to Marine Corps Recruit Depot in San Diego.

Vic flourished as a Marine — completing administrative courses, climbing in rank, and seeing the world. It was on the other side of the world, in Okinawa, Japan, that Vic “met and married the love of his life, Alexandra,” in an October 10, 2006, ceremony in Japan. With immense pride, Pamela recalls all of Vic's accomplishments, appointments, and home bases during the time he proudly served in the Corps. From California to Japan, the Pentagon to eastern North Carolina, he continued to excel and advance while she proudly watched from afar.

As I read the notes Pamela sent me, my smile grew wider the further down the page I read. She shared Vic's military accomplishments in chronological order with crispness and precision, but the small anecdotes — emotional memories in mint condition seemingly pulled right off a shelf, exactly where she'd left them — truly illustrated the bond between Pamela and Vic. Flashbacks to “You Saved Me” and “Peace in the World,” the soundtrack for the drive to the airport where Pamela would see Vic off to Japan and the way Vic held his son in his hands before he deployed to Iraq — these are all seemingly small moments that turned out to be anything but; they are hers to keep even now.

In his final assignment, stationed at Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point in North Carolina, Vic, CWO2 Victor Joseph Oloo Wanga by that time, led a team as a branch head. The incredible career that Pamela shared with me abruptly stops, though, and she simply asks, “Son, where would you be now and how far would you have climbed up your career ladder had you stayed with us?” Vic died on Nov. 12, 2018, in New Bern, NC, just a few miles down the road from the air station. In November 2023, Pamela reflected on the fifth anniversary of Vic's homegoing:

“Your sudden and unexpected departure in 2018 punctured our hearts, raptured our spirits, demolished our hopes, rambled our pillar of solace, and shattered our very existence.

“In the midst of pain and confusion, we have lifted our hearts to the creator, God, who gave you to us for a brief 33 years and thanked Him in appreciation for the fondest memories and the legacy you left behind which ushered us through the toughest of days and nights, and, as much as your absence hurts, we bear the pride of being closely associated with a personable, charismatic, outgoing, skilled, confident, highly motivated, knowledgeable, yet humble and selfless warrior and coach, the memory of whose legacy will remain unforgettably alive. We love and miss you, son.”

A Mother's Grief

Mothers pour their whole hearts into their children — they answer the sleepless newborn phase, the mischievous toddler years, and the rebellious teenage streak with complete and unconditional love, knowing full well that one day they will hold their children for the last time. They will pack up what their mothers taught them and take on the world; they'll meet challenges and successes, friends and soulmates, passions and their place in history.

Mothers eventually stand back and share their children with the world, and that's just what Maria and Pamela did — what mothers across the TAPS Family did. They shared their sons and daughters with us, with the U.S. military they proudly served, with their battle buddies, friends, their spouses, and children. What a bittersweet role it is to both love them first, and, upon their deaths, share them in grief.



TAPS provides a space for moms to process grief and heal alongside other moms in our recurring Moms Mentoring Moms or the specific New to Grief Online Group chats. Mark your calendar and log on for a healing session. In addition to these groups for moms, we host many more Online Groups based on type of loss, relationship to the fallen, and peer group. Browse the list to find the best fit for your healing.

taps.org/onlinegroups

THEY TELL ME OF *You*

Thomas Dolphin ★ Surviving Father of
SSgt Patrick R. Dolphin, U.S. Marine Corps Veteran

Good morning, my son, it's been a year,
Memorial Days come by so fast.
I wanted to tell you that each year at this time
Your brothers call and speak of your past.
They remind me of how close you became
During each workup before you deployed,
Of all the dumb things you did to each other.
Your company was always a joy,
Many have told me how smart you were—
Citing history and books you have read
Claiming they would have done things different
If they listened to what you have said—
That the sacrifices in preparing for battle
Were difficult for all families concerned,
But knowing that you would be with them
Aided in their hopes to return.

They let me know how brave you were
That in battle you led the way,
Calmly assessing the plan for the fighting—
Giving directions that would save the day,
That you carried a wounded soldier
Down a mountain far and high
Getting him fast to a Navy corpsman,
Assuring that he would survive.
Fearless described you in battle,
Surrounded with many wounded on the ground
That you came from over the next valley,
Providing cover for those all around.
I want to assure you, my son,
Your brothers have made it real clear:
They thank you every day for your Courage
When they thought their own deaths were near.
I always knew you would stand out,
That you took seriously the job you're assigned
But for those that became your brothers,
You could never leave any behind.
Your brothers will always remember you
For the friendship and care you did provide,
Telling me stories of what you meant to them,
Knowing I wasn't there when you died.

Memorial Days will come and go.
Families will gather, remember, and cry,
But those stories that are told by your brothers
Change my sorrow and tears to Pride.
This Day, we pause to remember
All those Heroes we have lost in our wars,
To you and your brothers and sisters,
Thank you for protecting our shores.

PHOTOS: TAPS ARCHIVES

A COMMUNITY OF SUPPORT

WE ARE GRATEFUL FOR THE CONTRIBUTIONS FROM SUPPORTERS AND MEMBERS OF OUR OWN TAPS FAMILY THAT SHARE OUR MISSION AND PROVIDE CRITICAL TAPS SERVICES



FOR 17 YEARS, TOM AND SHARON CHISHOLM HAVE HOSTED A FUNDRAISER FOR TAPS IN JUPITER, FLORIDA – OVER \$2 MILLION RAISED



PARSONS FEATURED TAPS ON THEIR ORNAMENT HANGING ON THE HOLIDAY TREE AT THE NEW YORK STOCK EXCHANGE



SCI ASSOCIATES CAN PLEDGE MONEY TO TAPS IN EXCHANGE FOR AN EXTRA DAY OFF IN THEIR "DAY OFF FOR A DONATION"



COLOR STREET PROVIDED SELF-CARE PRODUCTS TO OUR WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS



MISSION BBQ HOSTED FAMILIES FOR A TAPS TOGETHER



V-3 GATE NAMED TAPS THE CHARITY BENEFICIARY AT THEIR ANNUAL GOLF TOURNAMENT IN COLORADO SPRINGS



LIUNA! VOLUNTEERS WORKED AT EVERY REGIONAL AND NATIONAL SEMINAR IN 2023



BIDDING WAS FIERCE AT THE TAPS SINGER SONGWRITER SHOW IN DENVER, COLORADO



TITAN TECHNOLOGIES VOLUNTEERED AT THE DESTIN REGIONAL SEMINAR



PUTTING FOR PATRIOTS, HOSTED BY 33 ADVENTURE GOLF COURSES, RAISES MONEY FOR TAPS OVER MEMORIAL DAY EACH YEAR



THE 16TH ANNUAL TAPS GOLF OUTING IN ABERDEEN PROVING GROUND



THE GENEROSITY OF THE CAR DONATION FOUNDATION HAS HELPED TO SUPPORT OUR MILITARY SURVIVORS



SPENCER WING MEMORIAL GOLF TOURNAMENT



WASHINGTON INTERNATIONAL HORSE SHOW FEATURES THE TAPS JUMP WHERE RIDERS COMPETE TO RAISE MONEY FOR TAPS



TAPS SURVIVORS MEGAN SANDERS AND NATALIE CAGLE REPRESENT TAPS BEFORE THE VFW AUXILIARY IN LOUISIANA

PHOTOS: TAPS ARCHIVES



202-588-TAPS (8277) ★ TAPS.org

The Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors offers comfort, care, and resources to all those grieving the death of a military or veteran loved one.



TAPS is a participant organization in the Combined Federal Campaign, No. 11309

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"Each year, you remember. It warms my heart that you understand that some days are very difficult no matter how long ago your loved one died. Thank you for remembering."

— Colette Carpenter, Surviving Mother of MAJ Clayton Carpenter, U.S. Army

PHOTO: TAPS ARCHIVES



At TAPS, we know there is no time limit on grief. We are here to walk the path toward healing with you—recognizing that some days are harder than others. For comfort on the tough days, empowerment on the good days, and support every day in between, subscribe to **TAPS Daily Reflections with Dr. Alan D. Wolfelt**. These daily emails deliver the healing power of TAPS right to your inbox, reminding you that your community is with you each and every day.