

Life without Dad

Written by Elizabeth Barrett
Thursday, 11 February 2010 17:01 -



Family deals with husband, father serving in Iraq.

Long absences from her husband aren't unusual.

During his six-year marriage to Mary Schwanz, Robert Schwanz has been deployed twice to Iraq.

Robert, a 41-year-old Nebraska National guardsman, has missed his children's birthday parties, school and church events and special holidays like Christmas.

He's also lost time with his wife.

Mary, 28, describes herself as independent but admits that months away from her husband are lonely.

"Once the kids are in bed, it's me and Bill O'Reilly," Mary said with a laugh.

Mary and Robert have six children. The four oldest—Tanner, 17; Siera, 15; and twins Tyson and Skyler, 13—are from Robert's previous marriage.

Rounding out the family are Emily, 5; and Jackson, 3.

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The last time the Schwanz children saw their father was last May when he came home for two weeks after training for deployment to Iraq.

Last July, Mary and another friend with a husband in the same unit—the 1195th Transportation Company of Kearney—traveled to Jacksonville, FL, to see their husbands just before the men left for Iraq.

HEALTHY COPING

The following tips about coping with the return of a loved one from the military are offered by "Returning from the War Zone: A Guide for Families of Military Members."

■ Reconnect by having your loved one spend one-on-one down time with every family member and significant friends.

■ Provide support to your loved to interact with others and spend time alone as needed. Some time with war zone comrades is good but balance with family is also important.

■ Experiment with different communication styles. Your loved one may need to relearn the importance of sharing information. Don't be afraid to ask about the war or how your service member is doing but don't pressure him or her to talk.

■ Try not to give your loved one advice without listening thoroughly or telling him or her what they "should do."

■ Express confidence that you will be able to work things out and make a happy home for yourselves again.

■ Share and renegotiate roles.

■ Take care of yourself by doing healthy things to relieve stress like exercising, meditating, getting enough sleep and drinking alcohol only in moderation if at all.

■ Try to not to rush things. It takes time to become reacquainted and comfortable with one another again.

"I haven't seen him since then," she said.

Fortunately, Mary and the children see and visit with Robert almost every day through a computer program called SKYPE when he's not away on a mission.

That helps a lot.

So do family and friends, especially Mary's friend Liz Mins from Lexington whose husband Jay serves with Robert.

"We call each other our battle buddy," Mary said, noting that she often travels with her younger children to Lexington and Mins to Gothenburg for weekends or evenings. "She's the only other person who really understands."

Last summer, the friends took their kids to the Henry Doorly Zoo in Omaha.

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Dealing with loneliness is just one aspect of the situation.

With his boundless energy, Jackson often wears Mary out.

“Three-year-old boys are very physical. He has me in a headlock all the time and wants to be moving constantly,” Mary said.

Little boys especially need their fathers because of their physical nature.

“There are just certain things men are better at doing,” she said.

Mary said Jackson sometimes yearns to see his dad in person.

“He’ll become upset and wants his daddy and is tired of only seeing his daddy’s face and talking to him on the computer,” Mary explained.

Emily hides her emotions more.

“She’s not vocal about him but she’s excited when he’s coming home,” Mary said.

Instead, Emily expresses her feelings on paper—often writing “I miss my daddy” or “I love my daddy.”

Because of Jackson’s age, Mary said she wonders if her young son even remembers much of his father being at home.

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“It’s been so long now, he’s maybe accepted that he’s gone,” she said.

Still, Mary said Jackson is convinced that Robert will buy him a real gun once he returns.

When the children are missing their dad, Mary also shows them pictures of their dad or they watch home movies.

Not having their father around is also difficult for the older children but Mary said they understand that their father will return.

“They also have a better grasp of the danger involved,” she said.

During his time in Iraq performing dangerous missions, Mary said all she can do is pray.

“You have to trust God and trust that your husband will take every precaution to stay safe,” she said.

Robert first traveled to Iraq shortly after the birth of Emily in February of 2004.

In fact, Mary had driven to Kansas—where Robert was in training—to see him for Valentine’s Day and went into labor there.

Because that was the first time during their marriage he was away for a long time, Mary said she had difficulty adjusting to news of death and injury of soldiers serving in Iraq.

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As a member of the transportation unit, Mary said Robert and the platoon he leads escort convoys and gun trucks through the country about once a week where the chance of encountering roadside bombs is always a possibility.

“He has a lot of computer work and there are days he’s not supposed to go out but he’s not the kind of leader who stays behind,” she said.

These days, having dealt with the worst possible scenario many times before, she mostly wonders if everyone is okay when she hears about bombings and casualties in Iraq.

Robert is expected to walk through the front door later this week.

He’ll be with family and friends for about 15 days—several of them dedicated to watching son Tanner wrestle at a district meet and perhaps at state if he qualifies.

Robert’s deployment ends May 1 after he trains replacements and is debriefed.

Once he returns, as has happened numerous times before, Mary said there will be a natural shift in power.

“It’s hard sometimes,” she said. “I have to give up some power when he returns home.”

Before and after they were married in October of 2003, Mary said they did marital counseling and completed it before his second deployment.

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Now the couple sees a counselor in Cozad for what Mary calls “tune-ups.”

“They really help. Especially with a blended family, it’s not always easy,” she said.

Soldiers learn to detach from their emotions so they can return home with their sanity.

As a result, Mary said dealing with their homecoming can be challenging.

“He’s pretty strong of mind,” she said. “That’s how he’s able to deal with all the stress of deployment.”

During his absence this time, Mary learned how to install floor board in the basement.

“I’m pretty independent so I figure it out,” she said. “I do what needs to be done.”

Mary, who is a hairstylist at Main Street Hair Design, said her parents help a lot—especially with the kids.

As far as advice for others in relationships with soldiers who are gone for long periods of time, Mary said it’s important to surround themselves with family and friends.

“And do what you can to support your soldier,” she said. “Keep communication open, be positive, be faithful and pray for them every day.”

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Once he's home in May, Mary said Robert probably won't plan on any more deployment returns to his unit.

"He's planning to retire," she said.

ebarrett@gothenburgtimes.com 308-537-3636