

For these families, 'Every day is Memorial Day'



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TOP: Gary and Kelly Swanson sit on a memorial bench Friday at Holland Point. The bench honors their son, Staff Sgt. Christopher W. Swanson, 25, who was killed in Iraq on July 22, 2006.

BOTTOM: Since Marine Corps Lance Cpl. Eric W. Herzberg of Severna Park was killed in Iraq in October 2006, his Marine "brothers" who fought by his side join his family to honor him for Memorial Day. From left are: Marine Bryan Casey, Gina Barnhurst (Eric's mother), dog Murphy, sister Katie, brother Matt Herzberg, and Marine Anthony Prete. Both Marines just got back from their third tour in Iraq last weekend.

Families cope with ultimate loss by staying busy and keeping their loved one's memory alive

Every Sunday since the fall of 2006, Gina Barnhurst drives from Severna Park to Arlington to find some peace.

Among thousands of marble sentinels lining the rolling hills at Arlington National Cemetery she spends hours with her son, Marine Lance Cpl. Eric Herzberg, who was killed in Iraq in October 2006.

She sits next to his marker in Section 60, where hundreds of new white gravestones mark the current conflict abroad, and writes letters to her lost boy.

She never thought her time there would thrust her onto the national stage. But last year her act of motherly love was broadcast for all to see during the National Memorial Day Concert.

It is a distinction she would have gladly forsaken.

"But I agreed to do it if it might help someone else," she said sitting at her dining room table Friday. "Someone else hurting so bad."

In Rose Haven, Gary Swanson spends his time trying to get soldiers honored and cared for. He has started a charity to build a bay-side getaway for troops recovering at Walter Reed.

Since his son, Staff Sgt. Christopher Swanson, was killed in July 2006, Mr. Swanson pushed the state to issue Gold Star license plates, to match the Gold Star flags given to mothers whose children made the ultimate sacrifice.

"Every day is Memorial Day for a Gold Star family," Mr. Swanson said.

For many, Memorial Day is all about a run to the beach to kick off summer, catching a sale at the mall, and a cookout in the backyard.

But for thousands of families who have lost a son or daughter, dad or mom, husband or wife, it is about honoring those whom Lincoln said, "gave the last full measure of devotion."

Seven Anne Arundel County families have lost

Seven Anne Arundel County families have lost loved ones in Iraq or Afghanistan. This is a story of two of them trying to cope with the worst pain, the loss of a child.

Surrounded by heroes

"Every day, it's the first thing you think of," Ms. Barnhurst said. "You wake up, everything is OK. Then within seconds you remember. He is still gone."

She keeps busy. Her days are filled by teaching autistic children in the county's Infant and Toddler Intervention program at Point Pleasant Elementary School.

"The grief comes in waves, in cycles. You feel like you are on an even keel, then all of a sudden something knocks you down."

She looks forward to Sundays at Arlington.

"When it first happens you think you are alone, that it hasn't happened to other people," she said.

"But at Arlington I find some peace and strength, enough to get through until the next Sunday. I am there alone, with Eric and with God ... Surrounded by so much history, surrounded by thousands of heroes. It is a sacred place."

She also has found friends. Other mothers who regularly visit their fallen in Section 60 have gathered informally at the cemetery on Sundays.

"We also meet once a month at the Women's Memorial. Senator (Barbara) Mikulski helped us find a place to meet."

That sharing provides some comfort and she always tries to be there every month, in case there is a new mother who needs help.

She also finds comfort in helping the rest of Cpl. Herzberg's unit. She sends donations, sends care packages, and stays in touch.

The Marines reciprocate.

"What a wonderful bunch of guys. They call me from Iraq - 'How are you doing?' they ask," she said. "How am I doing? They lost a brother."

On Friday, the outside of her modest Severna Park duplex was decorated with flags and banners to welcome those Marines home from their second tour in Iraq.

"Welcome Home, Eric's 3/2 Marine Brothers" one banner said.

The Marines have really helped her other son, Matt, she said. "They have taken him out, treated him like a brother."

On the back of her car, along with other ribbons memorializing her son, Ms. Barnhurst has another sticker that sums up part of her feeling about Memorial Day. "Home of the free, because of the brave."

"I just hope people will take a minute, or five minutes, and say a little prayer. Say a prayer for those serving in Iraq and Afghanistan and around the world," she said. "And all our veterans, take a minute out to say a prayer of thanks for them, too."

She also mentioned those wounded coming home. "We are responsible for sending them there, and we have to take care for them."

A hole in the heart

Gary and Kelly Swanson lost their son, Army Staff Sgt. Christopher Swanson, about three months before Ms. Barnhurst lost hers.

Since then they also have tried to keep busy, to keep their minds occupied on something else besides the huge hole in their hearts.

Their son was on his third tour in Iraq when he was killed. He had been offered a slot at West Point but turned it down to be able to stick with the men in his unit.

"He was doing what he wanted to do," Mr. Swanson said.

The family has formed a charity aimed at helping returning troops. The SSG Christopher W. Swanson Support Charities for Veterans and Their Families Inc. has its official charitable tax status and is beginning to work toward its ultimate goal.

"We want to have a house on the bay for wounded troops from Walter Reed, and other veterans, and their families to come and relax," Mr. Swanson said.

It's a goal that is a ways off, but in the interim there have been scholarships and other awards for young people.

This year's scholarship recipient at Sgt. Swanson's alma mater, Southern High School, got a \$1,000 award.

"We have to give back to those guys. And we won't lose focus," Mr. Swanson said.

They also have stayed busy with the Gold Star organization. Families who have a son or daughter overseas get a flag with a blue star on it signifying their loved one's service. If the worst should happen, they get a gold star flag.

The gold star organization in Maryland had dissolved when the Swansons and another family pushed to revive it.

They also pushed to get Maryland to issue Gold Star license plates for those families who have suffered a loss in war. At ceremonies unveiling the plate early this year, Gov. Martin O'Malley gave credit where it was due.

"This was not an idea that ... one of us thought of," the governor said. "It was the effort of Mr. Swanson."

They also have visited troops at Walter Reed. "You do it because you can, not because you expect anything in return," he said.

And this weekend they are busy, too. While Mrs. Swanson is off giving a speech on behalf of Gold Star Mothers in Calvert County, Mr. Swanson will be up in Deale at another ceremony.

They were to have visited Arlington, where their son also rests in Section 60, yesterday.

"It was the only time we could make it this weekend," Mrs. Swanson said.

But it is the down times, especially in the evening that they fight the pain. "We're all in the same grieving process. We're all feeling the same way."

"It has been what, 21 months, now. And I wonder if I am grieving in the right way." Mr. Swanson said.

There are little things that help. They have received letters from President Bush and a small commemorative coin from him. Some friends secretly gathered material from Sgt. Swanson's uniforms and other belongings and made a quilt for the late soldier's parents. Area residents have donated a bench memorial for Sgt. Swanson at the local park, and there is another in Chesapeake Beach.

And they have their faith. "We just keep going trusting the Lord won't give us more than we can handle."

The Swansons also hope people take pause to honor the fallen in some way. Their thoughts are summed up in a phrase embossed on their charity's calling card: "A soldier only dies if they are forgotten."

Tomorrow is an opportunity to keep their memory alive.