

For the Loved Ones of Those Who Served and Died

T★A★P★S[®]

TRAGEDY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM FOR SURVIVORS

WINTER 2023



Love Lives On

*“Remember that you come into
this world in the middle of the movie,
and you leave in the middle;
and so do the people you love.
Love never dies,
and spirit knows no loss.”*

– Louise Hay





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- TAPS Together
- Women's Empowerment
- Men's Program
- Young Adults Program
- Youth Programs
- Sports & Entertainment Events

* For full descriptions, see pages 18-19.



ON THE COVER: As winter settles in, this photo reminds us that our loved ones who have died are still beside us. We cherish the memories and objects they left with us for safekeeping; we honor them in our traditions this season; and we smile bittersweetly at each Godwink in our path. The loss is immeasurable, but, as we say at TAPS, the Love Lives On.

COVER PHOTO: ISTOCKPHOTO.COM/4MAKSYM

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.

TAPS MAGAZINE
VOLUME 29, ISSUE 4

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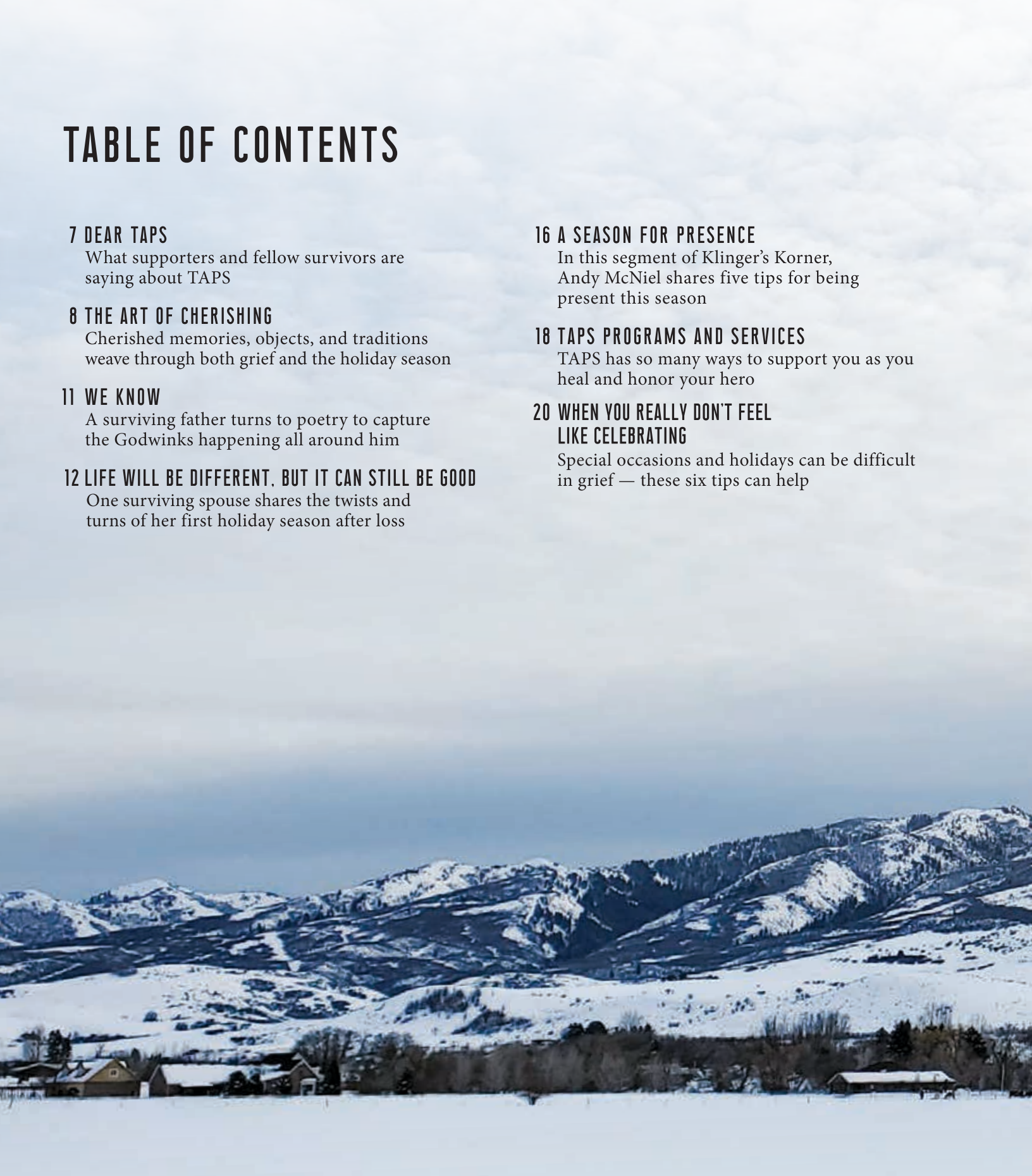
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TAPS Young Adults enjoyed this view during their Winter Experience in Park City, UT, in March of 2023. Surviving young adults, ages 18 to 30, visited the Utah Olympic Park, participated in winter recreational activities, and developed self-confidence and community in a picturesque winter wonderland. ✨ PHOTO: TAPS ARCHIVES

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To Our TAPS Family,



Welcome to the winter 2023 issue of *TAPS Magazine*. I hope wherever you are this holiday season, it brings you comfort, warmth, and inspiration for the new year ahead of you.

In the pages that follow, you'll read powerful words written by your peers — those fellow survivors who know without explanation what is on your heart, especially this time of year. You'll also hear from experts in the fields of grief and loss who are dedicated to supporting you on your journey toward healing.

As winter's chill and shorter days nudge us inside and we wrap ourselves in comfort — whether a cozy blanket, the embrace of family and friends, memories of winters gone by, or wishes of winters that could have been — this magazine is here to be your companion for the season, reminding you that you are never alone.

As we prepare to welcome 2024, we reflect on all the precious moments we've shared with you throughout 2023. Whether you joined us at an in-person event, an online meeting, or you've just sat quietly with us through the pages of this magazine, we are honored that you shared your story with us and trusted us with your grief.

In 2024, the 30th year of TAPS, we hope you'll continue to hold tight to your TAPS Family. There are so many ways to grow with us just as you grow with your grief. Consider trying something new with TAPS next year — attend a seminar, meet us for a retreat somewhere you've never been, discover bold and meaningful ways to honor your fallen loved one, become a Peer Mentor when you're ready, or bravely face your grief with us, knowing you will be understood, supported, and met with compassion.

No matter how you celebrate the season — whether you carry on traditions or create new ones, whether this is your first winter without your loved one or it's been many years — remember that we are never far. Find us online at taps.org or by phone at **202-588-TAPS (8277)** any time you need us. From our hearts to yours, may your season be filled with light, reflection, and hope for the healing ahead of you.

With love and comfort this holiday season and always,

Bonnie Carroll

Bonnie Carroll, *TAPS President and Founder*



PHOTOS: TAPS ARCHIVES



Dear TAPS

Care in Care Packages

“My mom told me about TAPS, and I signed up that very day. Several days later, I got this amazing care package full of awesome literature and coping tools. It was completely unexpected, and I’ll admit that I broke down when I opened it and saw that someone had gone through the work of carefully placing each item in there. It felt personal, but in a very good way...I started carrying the TAPS bag with me to and from work. It carried a current book I was reading as well as a journal that I started, which housed “letters” to my brother. It felt right to keep something so special in the bag. In my TAPS care package, there was a small spiral notebook with several photo sleeves in the front and then lined pages to take notes or perhaps jot down thoughts and feelings. I decided to use that notebook [for] funny stories about my brother that I could share with my niece during her sad or difficult times. Of course, I am not trying to suppress her feelings of sadness, but together we will work through it, and I will always have things to share with her about her dad right at my fingertips! So to those who send out the care packages, bless your hearts and know that I greatly appreciate everything you guys have done and continue to do!”

Kari Marine

Surviving Sister of SGT Donald Marine, U.S. Army Veteran

Promise Kept

“When participating in TAPS Good Grief Camp, I feel that I am working toward meeting the promise to my fallen friends. It is not only an institutional promise that we swear to in our respective service creeds (Warrior’s Creed, Airman’s Creed, Ranger Creed, etc.), but a personal promise to the memories of men I am honored to still call my brothers. I find it very fulfilling to give back to the families of my brothers and sisters who have fallen while in service to our nation.”

Col Peter Doty, U.S. Air Force, Ret.
TAPS Military Mentor

Grief and Growth

“I felt energized and renewed after the North Carolina Men’s Retreat. I made new connections with other men who lost a loved one. I felt comfortable and safe with other men I had not known before. I felt free to share my grief without judgment or criticism. I felt that I grew personally on my grief journey.”

John M. Fritz

Surviving Father of PO1 John Paul Fritz, U.S. Navy

Good Grief

“My oldest has attended Good Grief Camp for three years now. He absolutely loves it. He looks forward to it every year. He doesn’t feel comfortable expressing his grief with non-TAPS people, and when he attends these seminars, he feels safe and at home with mentors and peers who understand him. My youngest just attended Good Grief Camp for the first time, and he had an amazing time. He talks about his mentor daily, and I’m so happy that he bonded with his mentor at Good Grief Camp. I’m happy that TAPS Good Grief Camp exists, and I know it’s a safe place for my kids to work through their grief. I feel confident that they will always leave with one positive new lesson to help with their grief.”

Helen Tin

Surviving Spouse of MAJ Stewart McGurk, U.S. Army



Visit taps.org/deartaps to submit your TAPS experience and share hope and encouragement with others.

THE ART OF CHERISHING

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

After the death of someone close to you, you enter a time of deep grief. This is a normal and necessary time of transition. If you use this period of intense grief to actively and intentionally engage with your painful thoughts and feelings, you find ways to express them that are helpful to you. In other words, you do the hard work of mourning. You share your grief outside yourself — in doses over time — so that you begin to integrate your loss into your ongoing life.

Essentially, you mourn well so that you can eventually go on to live well and love well. Over time, you come to understand that while your grief is not something you “get over,” it has become an integrated part of your life story.

Your love is not something you get over either. Many people who have suffered the loss of a special loved one continue to feel their love for the person just as

much after the death as they did before the death (and sometimes, even more). Is this true for you?

If it is, you may have found yourself unsure of what to do with your love now. After your time of deep grief has passed, how do you continue to love and honor special people who have died as you fully live out your own remaining precious days here on Earth?

“Death ends a life, not a relationship. All the love you created is still there.

All the memories are still there.” — *Morrie Schwartz*



It's a tough question, and answering it in a way that feels right for you can be a difficult balance to find. As one grieving husband, Garrick Colwell, wrote to me, "Learning how to love my wife in her absence has been the biggest challenge I've had to face as I grieve and mourn her loss."

One of the most important things I've learned in working with countless grieverers over the years (and from my personal loss experiences) is that honoring and continuing to express love for those who've gone before us is a noble, fulfilling pursuit.

What's more, it's necessary. We continue to feel the love, and so we must find things to do with that love. I call the practice of intentionally honoring and holding dear someone who has died "cherishing."

The Art of Cherishing

To cherish means to protect and care for lovingly, to hold dear.

It's instinctual to want to continue to hold dear someone you love who has died. After all, they're a love of your life! They're still and always will be a big part of your patchwork heart. You will, no doubt, love them deeply for as long as you live.

You probably feel your love for the person who died constantly. You see a certain object, smell a certain scent, or go to a certain place, and you are reminded of the person who was so important to you. And there it is, a reflection of your love. Your heart twinges, you may smile, you may cry. You may spend a moment feeling your love for them and missing their presence in your life.

The love naturally bubbles up. It's beautiful, tender, and true. And it's a kind of cherishing. But the type of cherishing I'm proposing here is the art of more actively engaging with the love in some way.

Cherishing is intentionally creating moments — and taking advantage of opportunities when they naturally arise — to feel and celebrate your ongoing love more fully.

Cherishing also has to do with meaning and gratitude. When you cherish, you are honoring the relationship you had with that person and understanding how they mattered to you. You are pausing to remember and express your appreciation.

PRINCIPLES OF CHERISHING

CHERISHING IS...

Loving and holding dear



Congruent with inner thoughts and feelings



Active and intentional



Present-moment oriented



Life-affirming



Grateful



Honoring of Meaning



Bittersweet

(not all painful, but instead a mix of happiness and hurt)



CHERISHING OFTEN INCLUDES:

- Using the name of the person who died openly, freely, and often
- Telling stories about the person who died
- Making others feel comfortable and invited to talk about the person who died
- Offering others reminders of the person who died when appropriate ("Today was your grandpa's birthday," or "She loved eating ice cream")
- Keeping photos and objects that remind you of the person who died on display and talking about them with others
- Marking special days by honoring or "including" the person who died in some way (more about this soon)



Cherishing Rituals

The following example rituals are opportunities to cherish in depth and with structure. After reading through them, I'm sure you'll have your own ideas about cherishing rituals that would suit your family and help you continue to appreciate and express your love for the person who died.

- **Write down stories** of the person's life, death, and your love and loss. You can select to read one aloud at special holiday times, such as before Thanksgiving dinner. Or, compile the stories into a book and share copies with family and friends.
- **Create an anniversary ritual.** On the anniversary of the death or another significant date that you know will be painful for you, set up a routine that allows you to take a few moments to focus on and embrace your pain, your love, and your gratitude. The ritual can be done individually or with a group.
- **Make a gratitude jar.** Whenever you remember something about the person who died that makes you feel grateful, jot it down on a slip of paper and put it in the gratitude jar. Invite friends and family members to do the same. Once a year, at a group event, such as a birthday or on the anniversary of the death, gather everyone together and read the slips of paper aloud.
- **Include the person who died in any future rituals** that honor you or your family members. For example, if you will be receiving an honor at work, mention them in your remarks. Or, if you or someone in your family will be getting married, graduating, retiring, etc., find a way to incorporate the spirit of the person who died into the ceremonies.
- **Plan a road trip.** Create an itinerary of places that have been meaningful to you, your family, and the person who died. As you visit each special spot, take time to reflect and remember. If you keep a travel journal along the way, you'll have a valuable keepsake you can reread in the years to come.



- **Keep up a tradition** that was important to the person who died. If the person you miss was especially fond of a certain ritual or tradition — perhaps something on a holiday or other certain time of year — you can honor and include them in your ongoing life by continuing the tradition. For example, my father always enjoyed carving the turkey at Thanksgiving. In my family, before we have dinner we have a tradition of always pausing for a few moments of silence and remembering him.
- **Support others in grief.** If you're reading this article, you may well be interested in helping other people who have suffered life losses. When you feel the time is right for you, you might explore ways to help others in grief — for example, volunteering as a support group facilitator or providing companionship to a fellow mourner through TAPS. These are cherishing activities because you will be using your love for the person who died as motivation to help others who are grieving.

Cherishing as a Way of Life

Cherishing isn't just a way of remembering, honoring, and continuing to love someone who has died. It can also be a way of being. Do you cherish each new day and every encounter with the people you care about? Do you routinely place your attention on what matters? And conversely, are you able to shrug off or ignore the small stuff?

Grief cherishing makes you better at life cherishing. The more you actively engage in cherishing someone who has died, the more you may find your patchwork heart opening, making you a more kind, compassionate, and helpful person. It's as if the act of cherishing unlocks your vulnerability and capacity for empathy. It better attunes you to emotionality and spirituality.

To cherish is to celebrate and honor love, which is the greatest gift of human life. Grief is love, and love is grief. They are two sides of the same precious coin, and we find meaning in cherishing both.

About the Author



A longtime TAPS supporter, Dr. Alan Wolfelt serves as director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition and is a member of the TAPS

Advisory Board. He has written many books that help people mourn, including *Healing Your Grieving Heart After a Military Death* (coauthored with TAPS President Bonnie Carroll) and *Cherishing: The Art of Fully Living While Still Loving and Honoring Those Who've Died*, from which this article was excerpted. Visit www.centerforloss.com to learn more about grief and to order Dr. Wolfelt's books, and email Dr. Wolfelt at drwolfelt@centerforloss.com to share your cherishing stories and reflections.

We Know

Scott Pleasants ★ Surviving Father of PO2 Michael K. Pleasants, U.S. Navy
Poet Laureate of the Township of Teaneck, NJ

*Is it just a coincidence
when I hear your name
seven times this week
three on the bus
four times on the train*

*In the morning dew
as moisture touches the pane
The early rain writes a few letters
at a glance it's spelling your name*

*Still taking those long walks and afternoon rides
Same path along that sidewalk
Same route in the street
Same conversations
Same vibe often hearing you speak*

*When I opened the newspaper
I must have saw your name a dozen times*

*and if I forget to mention
on the corner of the intersection
back of that truck
The license plate with your initials
almost had me starstruck*

*The kids in my sister's class
one had your middle name as his first
the other your first was his last*

*Remember that guy
he still says to tell you hi
lives three houses down on the left
and the pilot at the airport
standing in line with the nameplate on his chest*

*The cup in the coffee house
with your name written on the side
and when they yelled across the cafe
we all turned towards the door and smiled*

*Now moving through our days
with a revived awareness
embraced in the people that we meet
feeling the wind dancing on a stage
that is seemingly new
and the movement in the ocean
that is recently blue*

*We now hear the bell tower that is ringing
The birds that are singing
And the dream in the morning
That offers the memories you're bringing*

*and just like that
we know that you're watching
seemingly you're always around
teetering at the threshold of overthink
each and every time*

God has decided to wink

LIFE WILL BE
Different,
BUT IT CAN STILL BE
GOOD

Heather Gray Blalock ★ Surviving Spouse
of Maj Walter David Gray, U.S. Air Force,
TAPS Peer Mentor



The first holiday season after my husband was killed in action was when I began to sense that God must have a sense of humor. A Costco-sized bag of candy each had bribed my children out of trick-or-treating. The thought of cold creeping as a single parent with masked little ones was more than I could handle. Feelings of guilt lingered over that until Thanksgiving. So, I decided I would pull it together and at least attempt to participate in the upcoming festivities. I made plans to spend America's holiday with nonmilitary friends where we lived in Colorado. I even agreed to prepare a rather time-consuming dish — a decision I regretted the Wednesday morning before Thanksgiving when I realized I must join the masses at the grocery store who had apparently also lost their ability to meal plan appropriately. I gathered my three still

pajama-clad children into my Wrangler for a quick trip. All was well until we stopped at a traffic light.

Across the street from where we sat waiting to turn, was a Christmas tree lot. Holiday music filled the air, and several kids happily danced around while someone on the far side of their car tied a tree on top. A smiling mom appeared next to the little ones, and, after opening their door for them, they all piled in. As she was shutting the door, a man in a military uniform came around to double-check the security of the car topper. Then the two lingered in an intimate embrace before leaving. Everything around me seemed to spin. My eyes clouded with tears as the grief wave slammed me. I have no idea how long I sat at the light, but the honking behind me indicated it

had been too long. When I came to my senses, I didn't go to the grocery store. I just started driving south and didn't stop until we were in New Mexico. My children were thoroughly confused, but still young enough to be easily appeased with ice cream and the prospect of an unexpected adventure with mom.

Thanksgiving morning dawned with us in an empty Holiday Inn and me feeling like an abject failure. The TV in the breakfast room showed a local news station advertising a traditional Thanksgiving feast being served to the homeless community at an old train station in downtown... wherever we were. Still in Tuesday night's pajamas on Thursday morning and feeling very displaced, I decided we would easily blend in and be fed in the process. The people facilitating the event apparently did not agree.

While waiting in line outside the station, a very kind man informed us that volunteers need not wait to get in and pulled us from the crowd. Before I could explain, we were donning hairnets and gloves and had individual assignments. My 8-year-old joined me in the serving line, and my 6- and 4-year-olds were given baskets of rolls to

IT WAS THEN I KNEW GOD HAD A SENSE OF HUMOR. ONLY HE COULD TURN MY GRIEF-DRIVEN MELTDOWN INTO VOLUNTEER SERVICE HIGHLIGHTED ON THE EVENING NEWS.

WE'VE MOVED THREE TIMES SINCE THAT FIRST CHRISTMAS 11 YEARS AGO, AND THOUGH I ROLL MY EYES AT IT EVERY YEAR, THE SPINDLY, WHITE WIRE TREE STILL HAS A PLACE OF HONOR IN EVERY FRONT YARD. LIFE IS DIFFERENT, BUT IT REALLY CAN STILL BE GOOD.

hand out. Not long into our unanticipated volunteer service, I felt a tap on my shoulder and was greeted by a reporter who, with the camera already rolling, sought permission to interview my daughter.

“It’s wonderful you all gave up your family Thanksgiving to give back to others,” the reporter said. “Tell us a little about you and your family and why you’re here.”

Ever truthful, my darling daughter replied, “Well, my daddy died in Afghanistan. We left Colorado for the grocery store yesterday morning and somehow ended up here today.”

It was then I knew God had a sense of humor. Only he could turn my grief-driven meltdown into volunteer service highlighted on the evening news. I also realized there was no point in trying to avoid the holidays and all that comes with them — no matter how painful and different they may feel after losing a loved one.

The last thing the chaplain who had performed my husband’s ceremony at

Arlington told me was, “Life will be different, but it can still be good.” After the Thanksgiving fiasco, I purposed in my heart to embody the words of that wise man for our first Christmas without my husband. Without him, it was impossible for us to have the exact same celebration of traditions anyway. So, I decided to embrace the different that could still be good. Knowing an empty monogrammed stocking with his name on it and ornaments with our family pictures over the years would likely be too difficult to see, I bought all new Christmas decorations. We even went to that same tree lot and bought a real tree for the first time. Normally, my husband and I were too conservative (or perhaps lazy) to do much to the outside of the house for the holidays, but that year I let the kids have free reign over choosing how to decorate. They started with a spindly, white wire tree with blinking, colored lights. It was painstakingly installed front and center by my elated children and their friends. Every inch of space would be covered with colored lights flashing out of sync with the bright red, plastic candy canes unevenly spaced down the sidewalk and driveway.

Our wonderful church family converged to help them, and when it was all finished, Christmas had thrown up on our house.

I honestly had never seen my children as happy as they were that first Christmas. The entire family got on board with embracing the different, and, for the first and only time since, all their cousins were at our house on Christmas morning. The next year, we spent Christmas at the beach, but the monogrammed stockings bearing our names came with us. In year three, we intentionally went back to New Mexico and then — together — we hung my husband’s perpetually empty stocking beside ours at home that Christmas. By year four, we felt much more stable but had fully embraced the crazy...I mean different.

We’ve moved three times since that first Christmas 11 years ago, and though I roll my eyes at it every year, the spindly, white wire tree still has a place of honor in every front yard. Life is different, but it really can still be good. And God definitely has a sense of humor, for which I am eternally grateful this and every holiday season.

PHOTOS: HEATHER GRAY BLALOCK; ISTOCKPHOTO.COM/KAROLINA MADEI



Comfort with a Cause

SHOP TAPS ONLINE THIS SEASON

When you shop the TAPS Store online, proceeds support the TAPS programs you know and love. The cozy styles you see here are just a few of the items available; visit taps.org/shop for even more apparel, housewares, books, jewelry, and gift cards.

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- A WOMEN'S ROUND LOGO FULL-ZIP HOODIE.....\$29.99
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A Season for
Presence

Andy McNeil, M.A. ★ Senior Advisor, TAPS Youth Programs

The holiday season brings families and friends together, creating opportunities to make and share special memories and create or carry on traditions. But, in the midst of intense grief, the holidays can feel like a burden rather than a blessed time with family and friends. When children are in the home, you may feel the need to maintain positive, festive energy so they can still enjoy this special time of year. This is a common experience for many bereaved adults. If you find yourself at that place, please know that you are not alone and, though it might be difficult, the holiday season can still be meaningful for you and your children.

This season, instead of trying to control the “outputs,” focus on your “inputs” — what you can control. While there is nothing wrong with having expectations in life — expectations of your own behavior, your children’s behavior, and household values — some of the expectations we have may keep us from seeing what is in front of us. Often at this time of year, we set goals for ourselves; this is a focus on outputs or outcomes. We might enter the holidays anxious about whether we can make it special for our children, worried that we won’t find the strength to appear happy while carrying the heavy burden of sorrow.

We all spend much of our lives focused on the burdens of the past and worrying about what comes next. We sometimes miss opportunities here in our present. But, focusing on inputs — even in the depths of grief — can ease the pressure, help you be present, and support you and your children this holiday season. Give these five ideas a try this winter.

Accept that sorrow will likely be a part of your holiday season. It is normal to experience the depths of our grief this time of year because it’s connected to so many special memories of those we love — or, in some cases, relationships that brought much pain. Accepting that grief is not something we can always control in the moment helps prepare us for when it comes.

Challenge fatalistic thoughts, like, “The holidays will never be meaningful again,” or “I cannot be happy without my person who died,” with thoughts that make room for hope. These can sound like, “The holidays will never be the same, but they can still have meaning,” or “I am grateful for my children, family, and friends this season, even though I am missing the person who died.”

Prioritize which holiday gatherings you will attend and which traditions you will celebrate. You do not have to accept

every invitation to celebrate the season. You can decide which invitations to accept and which you will pass on this year. The holidays can still be meaningful even with less busyness. Sometimes scaling back is the best thing you can do for yourself and your children. Kids don’t need a lot of pomp and circumstance; they just need a little of our time and attention.

Create a new tradition that allows you to honor and remember those who have died or those unable to be with you this year. Some have found that facing reality and creating a tradition to honor your person who died can add a meaningful layer to the season. You might plant a garden, light a special candle, create a memorial display, volunteer, or do something that your person would have loved to do.

Plan special activities with your children during the holiday break. Our children, and many of us, have time off around the holidays. With your children, identify some special activities you can do together over the break. It could be taking a winter walk, going to look at holiday lights or displays, watching holiday movies, or cooking special meals. Remember, even if you feel disconnected from the moment, you are still in control of your choices. The suggestions on the next page can help you get started.

PHOTOS: TAPS ARCHIVES; ISTOCKPHOTO.COM/ ULIMI/CHINAPONG

10 Holiday Activities for Family Time

1. Create a holiday menu together, asking each person what they want to include.
2. Bake goodies, package them in tins, and give them to neighbors or friends.
3. Invite someone who may be alone or facing their own difficult holiday season to share a holiday meal with you and your children.
4. Have each family member write down something kind they can do in honor of your special person. Put these ideas into a bowl, hang them on a tree, or attach them to a holiday display. Then, each family member selects one kind act to do in honor or in memory of your special person.
5. Make a viewing schedule for holiday movies. Be sure to include each family member's favorite.
6. Make your special person's favorite meal. Share the meal with family and friends while also sharing special memories of your person.
7. Go on a winter scavenger hunt. Think of items that you might encounter this time of year and see who can find the most items between you and your children. Or, look for these items as a family, and challenge yourselves to find everything on the list.
8. Come up with a family playlist. This can include holiday music or some favorite songs that may not be holiday-focused. You might also include some of your special person's songs on this list.
9. Make a list of each family member's favorite board game. Set aside time during the holidays to play each of these games together.
10. Prepare for 2024 by helping your children set intentions for the new year. Remember, focus on things you can control, like being kind to others, eating healthier, getting outside more, and spending quality time together as a family.

KLINGER, A STORY OF HONOR AND HOPE

Based on *Klinger*, a real horse that serves in the U.S. Army Caisson Platoon in Arlington Cemetery, Betsy Beard's *Klinger* is an endearing story written for TAPS honoring all of America's beloved fallen heroes. The children's book illustrates a young horse dreaming of fame as a racehorse, struggling to achieve his dreams, and then finding fulfillment in honoring fallen heroes and bringing comfort to their families. A journey of loss, grief, and hope, *Klinger* is a wonderful and helpful book for young children experiencing grief over the death of a military loved one. To learn more about *Klinger*, visit taps.org/publications/2010/klinger.



TAPS YOUTH PROGRAMS

TAPS Youth Programs provide safe spaces for surviving children to honor their loved one and explore their grief all while experiencing fun, adventure, mentorship, and camaraderie with peers, mentors, and caring professionals.

Visit taps.org/youthprograms to learn more and browse events, including Good Grief Camps, family campouts, and online groups and workshops.





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 post-secondary 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.

ILLNESS LOSS SUPPORT • 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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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.



WHEN YOU REALLY Don't Feel Like Celebrating

Facing Holidays and Special Occasions in Grief

William G. Hoy, DMin, FT ★ TAPS Advisory Board



The sights, sounds, and smells of the holidays remind grieving people that this year things are very different. In fact, you may find yourself dreading the holiday season more than any other time of year. Special occasions make it hard to grieve.

Special days are filled with sentiment, and that is part of what makes them hard. Whatever we do and wherever we go these days, we are bombarded by the sights and sounds of holiday decorations and music. When a cashier wishes a “Merry Christmas” or “Happy Holidays,” we might be tempted to respond with, “Bah, Humbug!” Even the scents of nutmeg and cinnamon in a favorite recipe cause bells to ring in our heads: Someone we love died and our world is changed forever.

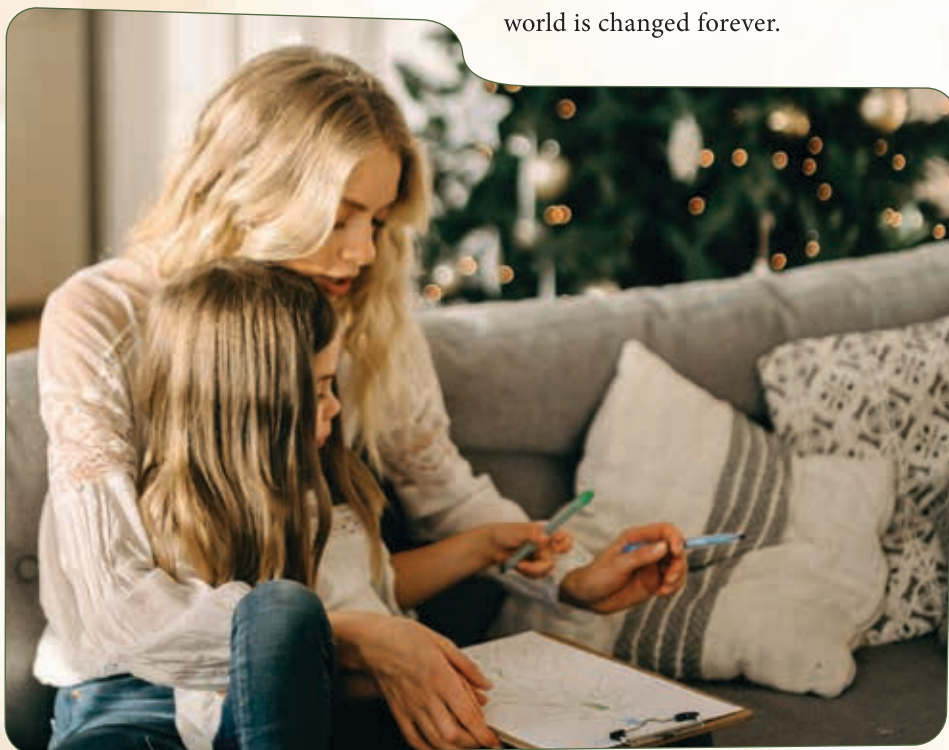
Holidays are also hard in grief because they are built around relationships. Family gatherings cannot ever be the same. And, of course, memories of bad relationships cause us to realize the past cannot be changed.

Most of us face special days in grief with a goal to simply get through them with a minimal number of scars. Instead, work to change your goal. Ask yourself, “What can I do to make this time a positive time of transformation for me, my children, and our family?”

TIP 1

Much like the 12-step movement reminds us, the first step is to **admit the pain of grieving through the holidays**. Saying goodbye to a loved one is no easy task, and, undoubtedly, it feels different than you could ever have expected. Moreover, our friends and family, though well-meaning, may say insensitive things that make grief extra hard. They might glibly tell you to “Just get on with your life.” But they offer that advice because they simply don’t understand.

There is an empty chair at the table on this special occasion. When that chair was empty during deployments or other periods of prolonged separation, you always expected your loved one to come back. The grief following a death assaults at every turn with the reality that they will not be returning to the table. Because holiday grief is so painful, there is no need to try escaping the pain this holiday season.





TIP 2

During this holiday season, **do only as much celebrating as you feel like doing.** Well-meaning friends or family may want you to attend parties and gatherings, hoping to cheer you up. You may want to participate in some of those events, and you always have to consider the impact of nonparticipation on others you care about, like children and elderly family members. But think in advance about others' expectations of you and the parties you are expected to attend. Make a plan about which invitations you want to accept.

You might want to have a family meeting about plans, decorations, and activities. If there are parts you anticipate being especially difficult, but they seem important to others, enlist help. If you cannot face preparing a full holiday meal like you have always done, but others want to keep the tradition alive, suggest a potluck where everyone contributes to the table.

Remember that grief is very tiring and — even under the best of circumstances — holidays are very taxing. Attending every event, party, or celebration may cause you to meet the new year feeling totally exhausted. You have permission to say no, even to well-intentioned invitations. Simply remind your friends that your energy level hasn't returned to where it was before the death, and thank them for understanding your need to decline.

TIP 3

Evaluate your traditions, and create at least one new one. If you stop now and make a list of all of your holiday traditions, the list may include a dozen or more activities — when you decorate the house, where and when you worship during the holidays, in whose home you share a family meal, and perhaps many others. Since you can't keep everything like it was, evaluate what you do for the holidays and determine — with your family's help — which traditions you want to preserve.

While you are deleting some activities, also create something new. You may want to light a special candle or purchase a special holiday decoration and hang it in your loved one's memory. Providing gifts to a needy family and hosting an international student in your home can also become meaningful holiday traditions. If facing the holidays alone is more than you can bear, consider volunteering at a local feeding program or senior living facility on a holiday, since volunteers are in short supply, but the need continues.

TIP 4

Don't forget during the harried pace of special days to **take care of your physical well-being.** Eating a well-balanced diet, getting adequate rest, and participating in appropriate exercise for your abilities are essential to the bereavement process and contribute to a positive attitude and outlook. Grief is stressful, so make sure you are carefully monitoring consumption of less healthy foods and potentially harmful substances: caffeine, processed sugar, alcohol and other addictive chemicals, animal fats, and processed foods. Be sure you are also drinking plenty of water. Of course, you'll want to talk with your health care professional about changes to your diet and exercise, but these ideas can help a great deal with your overall sense of well-being.

TIP 5

Grief on special days also challenges the meaning we make of experiences, so **give consideration to the spiritual dimension** of your life. The holidays have spiritual roots, and many people find themselves drawn to consider spiritual truth, especially when someone close has died. Worshiping with your faith community as the holidays approach or having a discussion with a spiritual leader are helpful ways to face special days in grief.

TIP 6

Don't forget to **embrace your memories of past holidays and special events** as you face this season. We cannot have things like they were, but we can hold in our hearts the memories of days gone by. Write your favorite stories in a journal. Look through photos in an album or on your phone. These are probably painful at first, but they help us face the future by celebrating with gratitude what we had in the past.



About the Author

Dr. William G. Hoy is a clinical professor of medical humanities at Baylor University in Waco, TX. A member of the TAPS Advisory Board and a widely published author, he is regarded as an authority on the role of social support in death, dying, and grief.

Special days in grief are not easy. What they can be, however, in addition to days of great pain, are days of amazing growth. Make a choice to thrive as you face these special days in grief.

GRIEF IS.

Augusto Cespedes, Jr. ★ U.S. Navy Veteran

GRIEF IS A MEMORY — *a deep thought you once tucked away and wished a hundred, million times was a fleeting moment.*

Valentine's Day, 2007, early evening, Haqlaniyah, Iraq — Danny Morris was the last one of my three best friends I had to say goodbye to.

GRIEF IS A NIGHTMARE — *vivid, living, beating, haunting, but part of you doesn't want to wake up.*

Confused and broken, I replayed his death over and over in my head, exhaustingly dissecting it like it was going to change things. But it was only day one of a week-long operation.

"Finish the mission," the radio blared, "CO's orders." The same questions repeated themselves in my head: Why? Why not me — why did I survive?

Time elapsed, my deployment ended, and by June 2007, it was my time to change duty stations.

GRIEF IS A STATEMENT — *formulated words of what the heart feels, impulsive, irrational, greedy — temporary relief just to relive it all over again.*

"Get me as far away as possible from this island," I said, having been in Hawaii since November 2004.

"Fargo, ND?" I just nodded — the further away, the better. "Really? Scandinavia?" they laughed, "that's extreme, Cespedes."

"Ever been to the East Coast?" a colleague asked. After several weeks, I decided: Lakehurst, NJ. I packed my bags and left Oahu, never looking back.

GRIEF IS A PROMISE — *a series of thoughts under your breath just for you and the one you lost and love. You mumble, stop, and start all over, again and again, just to get it right.*

During the plane ride over the Pacific, I rested my head on the window, feeling the cool sensation of the atmospheric air just on the other side.

"I am going to live my life for them. Whatever it takes." I felt an insurmountable amount of guilt about surviving Iraq, and the more I thought about it, the more it haunted me that my friends died at such a young age. We were all boys with aspirations.

"Virginia State Police," Danny would tell me during our downtime.

"I think I'd want to go back to school. I owe it to myself," Heath and Matt would each say.

I constantly thought about that — their voices in the background. I eventually

forced myself into nursing school and, miraculously, completed it. But I didn't stop there. I had my eyes on my bachelor's. I was pursuing a busy life, chasing a promise to myself that I couldn't break.

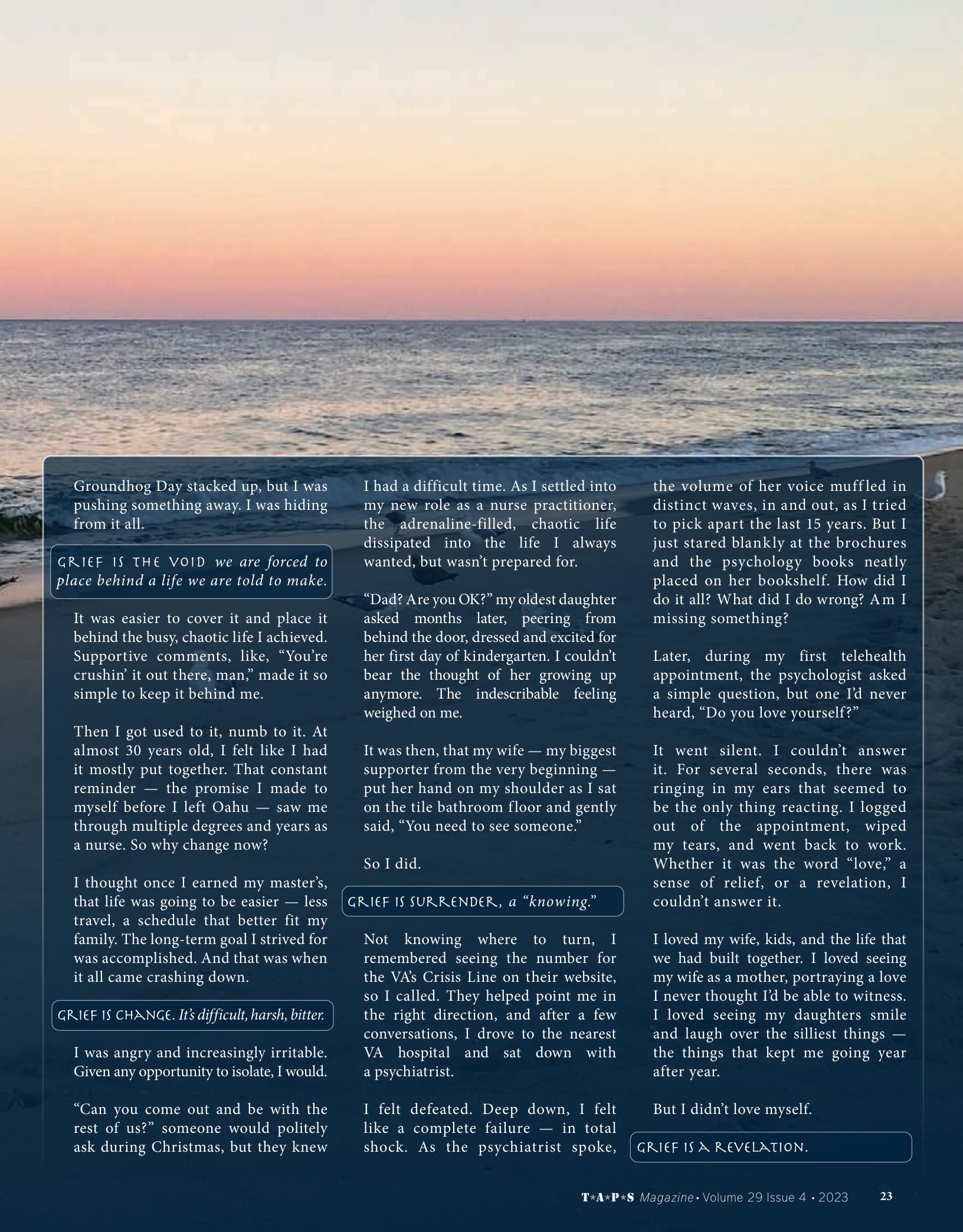
GRIEF IS THE DESIRE TO CLIMB — *to endure the pain, wipe the tears, lift our heads, keep moving, and never look back.*

For years, I kept myself busy — busier than most — working 12-hour shifts and posting college discussions at odd hours of the night. It was the pure adrenaline of it all that put my next foot forward, always coming back to the plane ride, the promise.

There were moments I'd see their faces — smiling, laughing, as we sat against the cement walls of houses. Even in the middle of the night, unable to sleep, we'd talk about our childhood memories and lifelong dreams — distant ideas to pass the time and keep us alive. A moment later, I'd open my eyes and snap back, the weight of guilt again hanging over me, "I'm alive because of them. I have to live my life for them."

GRIEF IS A ROUTINE — *an over-and-over sort of thing — a repetitious, lingering cycle.*

That promise got me through. Hours seemed to mesh together. Feelings of



Groundhog Day stacked up, but I was pushing something away. I was hiding from it all.

GRIEF IS THE VOID *we are forced to place behind a life we are told to make.*

It was easier to cover it and place it behind the busy, chaotic life I achieved. Supportive comments, like, “You’re crushin’ it out there, man,” made it so simple to keep it behind me.

Then I got used to it, numb to it. At almost 30 years old, I felt like I had it mostly put together. That constant reminder — the promise I made to myself before I left Oahu — saw me through multiple degrees and years as a nurse. So why change now?

I thought once I earned my master’s, that life was going to be easier — less travel, a schedule that better fit my family. The long-term goal I strived for was accomplished. And that was when it all came crashing down.

GRIEF IS CHANGE. *It’s difficult, harsh, bitter.*

I was angry and increasingly irritable. Given any opportunity to isolate, I would.

“Can you come out and be with the rest of us?” someone would politely ask during Christmas, but they knew

I had a difficult time. As I settled into my new role as a nurse practitioner, the adrenaline-filled, chaotic life dissipated into the life I always wanted, but wasn’t prepared for.

“Dad? Are you OK?” my oldest daughter asked months later, peering from behind the door, dressed and excited for her first day of kindergarten. I couldn’t bear the thought of her growing up anymore. The indescribable feeling weighed on me.

It was then, that my wife — my biggest supporter from the very beginning — put her hand on my shoulder as I sat on the tile bathroom floor and gently said, “You need to see someone.”

So I did.

GRIEF IS SURRENDER, *a “knowing.”*

Not knowing where to turn, I remembered seeing the number for the VA’s Crisis Line on their website, so I called. They helped point me in the right direction, and after a few conversations, I drove to the nearest VA hospital and sat down with a psychiatrist.

I felt defeated. Deep down, I felt like a complete failure — in total shock. As the psychiatrist spoke,

the volume of her voice muffled in distinct waves, in and out, as I tried to pick apart the last 15 years. But I just stared blankly at the brochures and the psychology books neatly placed on her bookshelf. How did I do it all? What did I do wrong? Am I missing something?

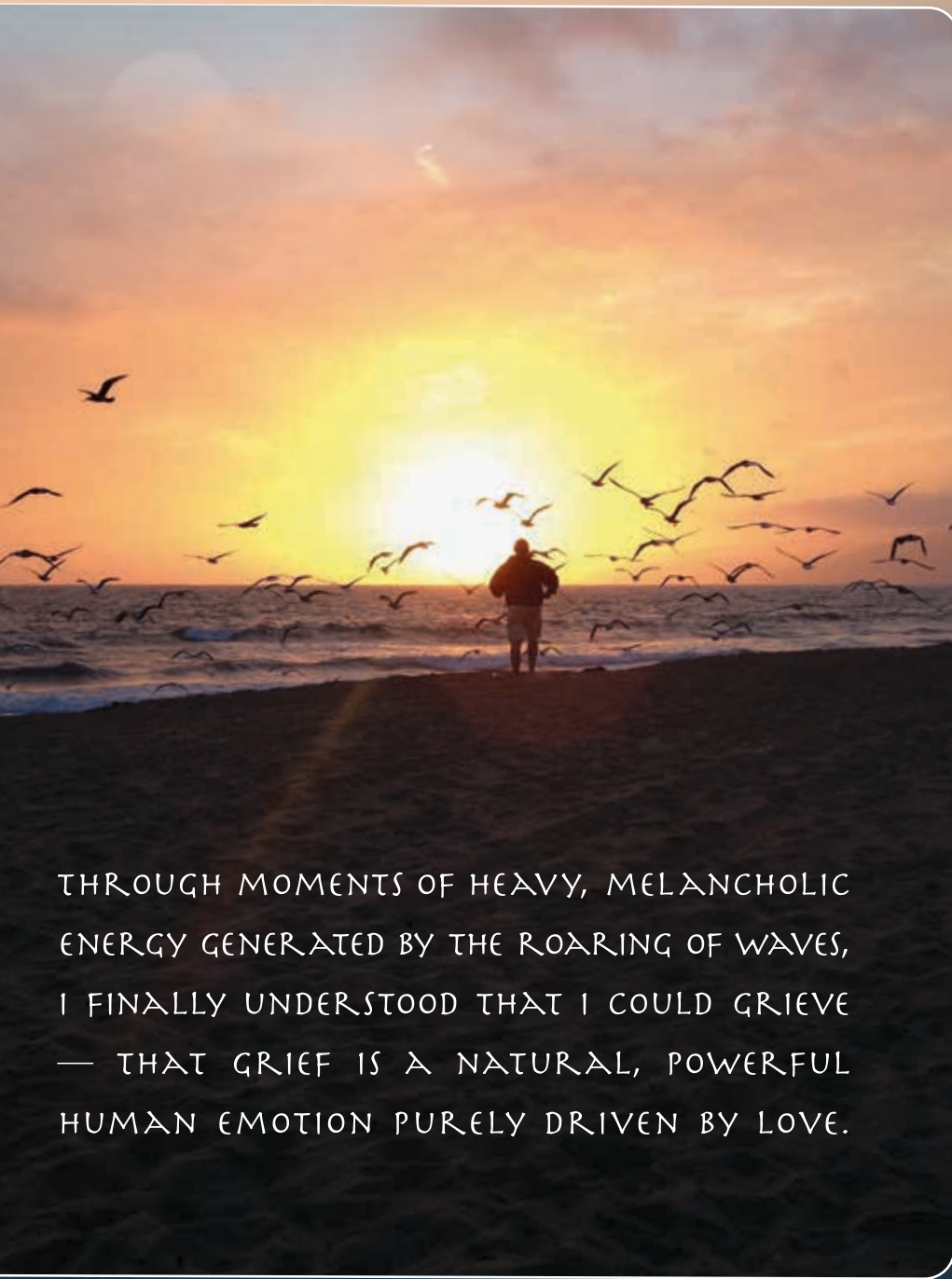
Later, during my first telehealth appointment, the psychologist asked a simple question, but one I’d never heard, “Do you love yourself?”

It went silent. I couldn’t answer it. For several seconds, there was ringing in my ears that seemed to be the only thing reacting. I logged out of the appointment, wiped my tears, and went back to work. Whether it was the word “love,” a sense of relief, or a revelation, I couldn’t answer it.

I loved my wife, kids, and the life that we had built together. I loved seeing my wife as a mother, portraying a love I never thought I’d be able to witness. I loved seeing my daughters smile and laugh over the silliest things — the things that kept me going year after year.

But I didn’t love myself.

GRIEF IS A REVELATION.



THROUGH MOMENTS OF HEAVY, MELANCHOLIC ENERGY GENERATED BY THE ROARING OF WAVES, I FINALLY UNDERSTOOD THAT I COULD GRIEVE — THAT GRIEF IS A NATURAL, POWERFUL HUMAN EMOTION PURELY DRIVEN BY LOVE.

About the Author



Augusto served as a platoon corpsman with the 2nd Battalion, 3rd Marines from 2004-07. He holds a Master of Science in nursing and currently lives in New Jersey with his family where he works as a nurse practitioner. His first book, *Just Glow, A Memoir*, will be released in 2024. You can follow his writing journey on Facebook at "Author - Augusto C. Cespedes, Jr." He honors the lives of Pvt Heath D. Warner, U.S. Marine Corps; HN(FMF) Matthew G. Conte, U.S. Navy; and LCpl Daniel T. Morris, U.S. Marine Corps.

For 15 years, I'd been determined to "live my life for them" — obtaining degrees, growing my paycheck, buying a house, chasing the next best thing. My motivation to build the life I had was born from that promise on the plane, but I never gave myself a chance to grieve.

"I'm fine. I don't need to think about it anymore," I'd always mumble to myself.

I never allowed my heart to open, embrace my grief, and mend. I hid my grief and love for myself behind the busy life I had yearned for. The act of loving myself and being able to grieve was so foreign to me.

GRIEF IS ANOTHER DAY.

On an early evening in late August, I sat on the beach of Sea Bright, a familiar place we'd go as a family. It was a beautiful day with intermittent periods of crisp, whispering air dancing along the shore. The sun, a warm, radiant ball of light, sat alone in a sky the shade of baby blue eyes — a perfect conclusion to summer.

As I zipped up my sweatshirt, a breeze caught me under my chin causing me to glance up from watching the seagulls scavenge for food.

The sun was now a glowing ember, providing its last moments of warmth as it laid down to rest. It was the blending of soft, magnificent colors of day and night that I couldn't stop staring at. And it was then that I noticed a speck of an early moon had appeared — a tiny, white pearl in the distance.

I've never seen it that way — not like that — pure contrast existing in perfect unity in the same sky. The sun and the moon together were breathtaking.

Through moments of heavy, melancholic energy generated by the roaring of waves, I finally understood that I could grieve — that grief is a natural, powerful human emotion purely driven by love.

Day and night had paused for me to see them both together, in perfect harmony. And as day and night harmonized in that moment, grief and healing, together, can exist.

Grief is...

PHOTOS: AUGUSTO CESPEDES, JR.; ISTOCKPHOT.COM/NWCLEFTY; PEXELS.COM/GANTAS-VAIAJULIANAS

Living *Legacies*, Meaningful *Healing*

Great loss is often accompanied by questions — many of them posed to ourselves in quiet moments. *Why did this happen — why him, why her? Where is the meaning? What am I supposed to learn? How can I find peace again? How can I use my life, my talent, and this pain to honor the life of my person?* Though we may never find satisfying answers to each of these questions, we might find our own healing, passion, and purpose in pursuit of clarity.

As we prepare to step foot into a new year together, we wish you a year of peace and healing. The four stories that follow are four different stories of loss, but they are also four very different stories of meaningful healing — in ways the survivor finds comforting, and in ways that honor the lives of their heroes. Keep these inspirational stories in mind as you walk your own path toward healing.

Remember, TAPS is by your side — our programs, events, and seminars can connect you to healing, experiences, and peers who will support you on your way. And, with opportunities to serve your survivor community as a Peer Mentor, TAPS Together host, Care Group leader, and more, you can carry on your loved one's legacy of service with us.

Write it Down

Kristi Stolzenberg ★ Editor, *TAPS Magazine*

Karl Porfirio, surviving father of SrA Tre Porfirio, U.S. Air Force, was not a writer by trade when he sat down to write *My Daddy's Heart is Purple*, but his dedication to honoring veterans and preserving his son's memory earned him the title of children's book author in 2018.

While stationed in Afghanistan, Tre was shot in the abdomen, severely injuring his pancreas — the organ responsible for producing insulin. Thanks to the rapid response from the team in country, Tre, then 21, was routed back to the U.S. and

made medical history as the first person ever to receive an islet-cell transplant due to trauma.

Though it was an uphill battle punctuated by many surgeries, the innovative procedure allowed Tre to live one year and one week after sustaining his injuries. It allowed him to be there when his son was born. His son, Landon, was just 8 months old when Tre died on Nov. 28, 2010. Since then, Karl — or Nonno as he appears in the book — has poured his heart into his relationship with Landon and the

book he would go on to dedicate to him. Karl wrote *My Daddy's Heart is Purple* to teach children, including his grandson, about service, sacrifice, and honor — specifically the Purple Heart. And, it helps surviving children understand the difficult concept and permanency of a parent dying.

Through his grief, Karl found his legacy — the book that will forever honor his son and support his grandson and generations of military children and surviving children anxious to learn about their mothers and fathers who sacrificed for their country.



TAPS supports all those grieving the death of a military or veteran service member, including young survivors. To learn about all the opportunities available through **TAPS Youth Programs**, visit taps.org/youthprograms.

“What is life? And how do I live it without the only person I loved? I had to learn to walk again...alone.”

My *Camino*

Noriko Stern ★ Surviving Spouse of CWO4 Christopher Stern, U.S. Navy, Ret.

I laced up my hiking boots and strapped on a 10-pound backpack as I started my walk from Saint-Jean-de-Port. The sky was sunny and blue, with no clouds in sight, as I started my ascent 10 miles up the Pyrenees mountain. The Camino Frances is a 500-mile pilgrimage and has been walked by thousands of pilgrims before me. It is believed the body of the Apostle St. James is buried in the Cathedral Santiago de Compostela where my journey would end.

The walk does not have to be religious — anyone who feels the need to walk this trail can do it, no matter the reason. My reasons were self-reflection and the meaning of life. When my husband, Chris, passed away by suicide in August 2018, I had so many questions about life. I moved in October 2018 to be closer to my daughter, and before long COVID closed everything down. During that time, I withdrew and looked

inward in search of answers — answers I knew I would never find. What is life? And how do I live it without the only person I loved? I had to learn to walk again...alone.

Four years later, as the grief fog lifted, I wanted to challenge myself — to do something out of the ordinary, for me. So, I attended a meeting with my local Camino chapter. After that first meeting, my mind was made up. I knew in my heart I had to make the pilgrimage for myself. I needed to get my self-confidence back, even though I was scared to face the world alone.

On the Camino, the rural landscape suited me — from the open space of the meseta to the valley, where fields of yellow rapeseed flowers covered the ground and church steeples climbed into the sky in the distance. No matter the weather, you walked every day, for this was the only task at hand — to walk.

People from all over the world come to walk the Camino. Germans, Italians, French, Dutch, Chinese, South Koreans, and Canadians were all part of my life on the Camino. They became part of my journey — my Camino family — embracing me with a warm heart, a hug, and always a beautiful smile. It was this spirit that I loved! It allowed me to be me — my authentic self.

I finished the Camino after 31 days. It was a rainy, windy day as I walked into Santiago de Compostela. Soaked to the bones, but grateful for this day and the opportunity to be in this place. There is always an end to a journey, but I felt this was just the beginning — a beginning to my future.

The Camino did not answer all my questions about life. Instead, it taught me things about myself. I am strong and courageous, and I know now that it's OK to be afraid.



TAPS offers a variety of retreats, experiences, and physical challenges throughout the year that can help you honor your fallen hero while finding your own way after loss. Find opportunities to step outside of your comfort zone, travel, and heal with TAPS in 2024 by visiting taps.org/events.

Carry the *Legacy*.....

Dianne Layfield ★ Surviving Mother of LCpl Travis Layfield, U.S. Marine Corps

My son, U.S. Marine Corps LCpl Travis Layfield, was killed in action while serving in Iraq on April 6, 2004. Travis was killed in an ambush along with nine of his Marine Corps brothers and one Navy corpsman during the Battle of Ramadi. Travis was only 19 years old.

After losing my son, I was so afraid that he would be forgotten as time slipped by. And, since his passing, I have worked tirelessly to honor Travis and ensure his service and sacrifice are remembered. In 2014, my efforts led me to Kelly Estes, founder and CEO of The Cost of Courage Foundation. We connected through the mutual desire to honor fallen heroes of all generations and carry their legacies forward. Kelly founded her nonprofit in honor of her uncle who was killed in action during the Doolittle Raid in WWII. In her uncle's name, The Cost of Courage Foundation sponsors scholarship and emergency assistance programs for veterans, service members, and Gold Star Families, and in 2019, she shared the remarkable idea of funding the LCpl Travis Layfield Memorial Scholarship. The scholarship would directly support a Gold Star Child, Spouse, or Sibling in completing their education so they could go forward and make a positive impact.

This opportunity gave me a way to honor Travis and keep his memory present — exactly what I hoped I could do. Elated, I gave my blessing for the scholarship to proceed that year. Since 2019, four LCpl Travis Layfield Memorial Scholarships have been awarded to deserving recipients who have gone on to pursue careers in

the medical field, law enforcement, social work, and public health, and the fifth annual scholarship will be awarded by the time you are reading this, in November 2023.

Being a part of the scholarship selection committee allows me to read through all of the applications and essays that we receive from Gold Star Family members nationwide. It's an honor, and I am always deeply touched by the stories of the applicant's own hero and how their loss has impacted their career aspirations and educational goals.

With so many wonderful applicants, it can be challenging to choose one who most closely embodies Travis' legacy. But, we are so proud of those who have been selected — they truly made the most of the opportunity, and they keep us updated on their progress over the years. Our scholarship recipients truly become part of our family, and we are forever connected through Travis.

This scholarship has helped me positively channel my grief. Just being given the chance to have a scholarship in my son's name is truly incredible, but knowing applicants think of him as they write their essays assures me that he will never be forgotten.

I cherish the moment I am able to meet the annual scholarship recipient — either in person or virtually — and come together through shared grief that only a small percentage of the population understands. Though everyone's journey is different, the underlying pain Gold

Star Families experience is shared. If connecting through this scholarship and sharing my story provides comfort to a surviving family member who is grieving, there would be no greater blessing in my son's name. Thanks to Kelly and The Cost of Courage Foundation — and to TAPS for sharing our scholarship opportunity — Travis' memory and legacy will live on.



PHOTOS: PEXELS.COM/ITHALU-DOMINGUEZ; DIANNE LAYFIELD



To learn more about the LCpl Travis Layfield Memorial Scholarship and the many other scholarships available to surviving family members, visit taps.org/edu.

What We *Set Out to Do*.....

Katie Davis ★ Surviving Sister of SSG Brandon C. Franzen, U.S. Army

On July 17, 2019, SSG Brandon C. Franzen passed away surrounded by his loved ones, at the Ohio University Wexner Medical Center, after a long battle with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). He was just 34 years old, and he'd spent 12 of his years serving in the U.S. Army.

Our mom, Cathy, would tell you that Brandon was an avid dinosaur fan, and he loved Mario and online gaming, tattoos, performing bike tricks, riding four-wheelers, and attending rock concerts — especially Iron Maiden. He could be very stubborn, but he was hardworking and so smart. He loved his sisters — including me — and he lived to protect them — including me. And, he would help anyone in need. We love him and miss him every day, and I was determined to honor my brother in a way that would bring awareness to PTSD and PTSD-related suicide among veterans and service members.

I'm Katie Davis, Brandon's sister. In July 2020, I organized the 1st Annual Brandon C. Franzen Memorial 5k Run/Walk, and by August 2020, I established the Brandon C. Franzen Memorial Foundation, Inc. The foundation, or BCF, as those of us at the heart of operations call it, brings awareness to the PTSD crisis and the toll it takes on the mental health of our service members. We believe that if we can save one life, then we have honored SSG Franzen and his service and sacrifice for the country he loved so much.

BCF has become a source of healing for my family. I work alongside my mother, sisters (Tiffany and Lisa), and my husband,

Nathaniel, to raise funds that we donate on behalf of BCF. Our focus — as a growing nonprofit — is making our annual 5k as successful as possible. This year's race was our most successful, and we met our goal of 200 participants.

This year's race was especially meaningful for me, not as the proud organizer, but as a participant. I was the first one to cross the finish line, with a time of 21:59. I cried tears of victory as I crossed the finish line, and I was greeted there by one of my former 4H advisors who held me in a big hug as the moment sunk in.

It fills me with pride to witness special moments along the route for many participants. Lisa and Nathaniel carried American flags across the finish line for our fallen soldier. Girl Scout Troop 9400 volunteered and walked the course. Spunky Clovers 4H, handed out finisher medals. And, in an inspirational moment, participant 4224, an elderly gentleman determined to cross the finish line for our veterans, completed the race with great pride and excitement.

We have participants finish our race who have never completed a 5k. I've seen them cry, overcome with emotion, as they cross the finish line. Veterans, service members, suicide-loss survivors, and citizens — we all come together on race day to honor SSG Brandon C. Franzen and be a presence for military-connected PTSD. We'll soon begin planning our fifth 5k, which will be held on July 20, 2024, and we would love to run alongside members of our TAPS Family.

Brandon, we love you, we miss you every day, and we will never stop fighting for your legacy. If we can save one life, then we've accomplished what we set out to do.



If you are looking for a special way to honor your fallen hero, consider joining Team TAPS to participate in races and special events nationwide. You can also apply for Fallen Hero Match if you'd like a Team TAPS member to honor your hero in a race. Find more at taps.org/teamtaps.

Leaving a *Mark* on History

Matt Davison ★ U.S. Air Force Veteran

In serving incarcerated veterans, I formed bonds with warriors who took part in wars spanning Korea, Vietnam, and the Gulf War. One vet, who is incarcerated at the Federal Correctional Institution at Terminal Island, California, precedes all these wars and has become a valued friend over the past five years. Because of confidentiality issues, I will not give his complete name, but will refer to him simply as Rene. This is his story.

Rene is a World War II veteran, a Marine, and one of the many Marines who took part in the invasion of Iwo Jima under the leadership of General “Howlin’ Mad” Smith on Feb. 19, 1945. Rene was part of the 5th Marine Division that was there on the first day — when U.S. Marines took 2,400 casualties and 600 dead. Historians

agree that the invasion of Iwo Jima was the bloodiest battle of the Pacific. During the entire operation, Marines and sailors suffered 6,800 killed and more than 18,000 wounded. Japanese soldiers fared far worse. Of the 21,000 Japanese soldiers entrenched on the island, 20,000 were killed.

Rene was born in upstate New York in 1924. He and his family lived through the Great Depression. They were a close-knit and loving family. He was in the 10th grade when a radio news flash announced the attack on Pearl Harbor. He recalls all the students being called to assembly to hear President Roosevelt’s remarks, including “a day that will live in infamy.” A conscription would soon be instituted to draft all high school graduates and men from 18 to 27 years of age.

For Rene, it seemed that life had been forever changed and was now full of uncertainty. He graduated from high school in 1943, moved with his family to California, and volunteered for the U.S. Marine Corps. Rene took his boot camp training in San Diego. He became an expert with the M-1 rifle and graduated Private First Class. From San Diego, he was shipped out to Camp Pendleton where the 5th Division (Spearhead Division) was formed.

The *Story* in Rene’s Words

After six months of intense training, our division was shipped out to Camp Tarawa on the Big Island of Hawaii. Another four months of vigorous training followed.

RENE IS A WORLD WAR II VETERAN, A MARINE, AND ONE OF THE MANY MARINES WHO TOOK PART IN THE INVASION OF IWO JIMA.

PHOTO: PEXELS.COM/PHAM-CHUNG



Finally, in January of 1944, the division sailed out of Hilo. We had no idea what our final destination would be. Some 800 vessels of all types made up the invasion armada, and after several days at sea, we were finally told that the target was a small volcanic ash island just 350 miles southwest of Japan, called Iwo Jima.

We were also told that the island was made up of earth-covered structures with connecting tunnels that ran from one end of the island to the other. At the left end of the island stood Mount Suribachi, where defenses were coordinated. The division was briefed by intelligence and told that the operation could probably be accomplished in short order. It soon became evident that support — such as battle wagon guns — was lacking, and that Admiral Spruance, chief of our task force, had decided that the attacks on Tokyo took priority over Iwo Jima.

The main objective for taking Iwo was to destroy the Japanese radar station

that alerted anti-aircraft stations on the mainland and seize the airfields there. Japanese fighter planes, attacking from the Iwo Jima airstrips, were shooting down too many American B-29s returning from bombing runs over Japan. General Curtis Lemay wanted those airstrips for his B-29s and P-51 Mustangs.

U.S. forces dropped 5,800 tons of bombs in over 2,700 sorties. This bombing only seemed to strengthen the enemy's fanatical will to defend Iwo at all costs. Each Japanese soldier was instructed to kill at least six or seven Marines before dying.

We were awakened at 3:30 a.m., served a breakfast of steak and eggs, and given a "good hunting" message from our commanding officer. The first wave of the attack hit the beach around 9 a.m. Climbing down the cargo net was a tricky maneuver with full packs and weapons. One missed step would result in being

tossed into the churning ocean. There were 40 men per landing craft.

As we neared the beach, we observed devastating gunfire coming from the island and blanketing the beach, blowing up landing craft on either side of us. It was the most frightening moment in my life. Our training paled in comparison to what was actually happening.

As we hit the beach, the ramp was dropped and we dashed through raindrop-like barrages and explosions, trying to get to some protected coverage. I ripped my pack off to move faster and dug in. When I went back to retrieve my pack the only thing that was left was a crater hole from where a mortar had hit. The landing beach was a mass of Marines being put ashore and having almost no place for cover. It was like shooting fish in a barrel.

This lasted all morning and intermittently throughout the day and night. Our landing on the Red Beach 2 location was about 500 yards from Iwo's number one airfield and about 2,000 yards from the base of Mount Suribachi. During the devastating barrages from enemy weapons, we attempted to dig our foxholes. My buddy and I, along with the rest of our troops, were taking sniper fire from the airstrips in front of us. Hidden behind a wrecked Zero aircraft above our elevation, he had good cover. The sniper was eventually silenced after an hour or so, after taking his quota of young Marine lives. The Japanese had the advantage of directing gunfire from Mount Suribachi. Our commanders considered withdrawing us from the battle because of the great losses we incurred through our first day.

Everything had been stalled on the beach. That night, we finally started to slowly move inland. The constant rain, along with the volcanic sand, caused our heavy equipment to be bogged down, making



THIS AMPHIBIOUS LANDING WAS A NIGHTMARE. BUT WE WERE TO PREVAIL IN SPITE OF THE ODDS. HOW DID ANY OF US SURVIVE THE BEACH LANDING?



RECOGNITION FILLED THE ROOM IN THE FORM OF APPLAUSE, HUGS, HANDSHAKES, AND SOME TEARS.

it difficult to move off the beach. This amphibious landing was a nightmare, but we were to prevail in spite of the odds. How did any of us survive the beach landing? This is a question that I have asked myself over and over again. It's a very haunting memory that I have carried — and will carry — with me for the rest of my life.

Picking up Where Rene Left Off

Rene was unable to share the rest of his Iwo experience because of the distress and anguish these memories evoked. He tells me that he feels guilt because he was able to come home when his buddies didn't make it through the battle. I've heard this sentiment many times from veterans of all wars. At one point in his life, Rene made a wrong turn — a mistake, and he was incarcerated. Now, he would become just another forgotten veteran, joining the many others incarcerated or homeless out

on the streets. But an unexpected phone call changed all that for Rene. The curator from the LA Veterans History Museum called me to say the museum had just dedicated a section to the Battle of Iwo Jima; she was given a lithograph of the flag raising on Mount Suribachi to hang in the museum — the original is in the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C. She asked if I knew any veterans of this battle wanting to put their signatures on the lithograph before it was displayed.

Yes, I knew one man, explaining that he was incarcerated at Terminal Island. She asked if he'd be able to sign the lithograph; I promised to find out. To my surprise, the administrators at Terminal Island gave permission for the curator to enter the facility and have Rene sign the lithograph. Arrangements were made, and a date was set.

On the day of the event, my team and I, the museum curator, and Rene's 85-year-old

sister (to whom he was devoted) gathered at the institution. We were led into a special room and joined there by prison administrators and the warden. Then all the veterans we served were led in to witness the event. The lithograph was unrolled and Rene signed it. Recognition filled the room in the form of applause, hugs, handshakes, and some tears. The institution even provided refreshments for attendees to enjoy after the ceremony took place.

UPDATE: Since this essay was written, the LA Veterans History Museum closed its doors. While this is unfortunate, the lithograph did have its moment in the sun, and Rene was not just another forgotten veteran. Rene was released from prison in 2007; I never asked him what he was convicted of. I didn't care. I only cared that he was a beautiful soul and brave warrior. Like the museum that held his Iwo Jima lithograph, he has since passed, leaving the battlefields of heroes, and I miss him still.



JOIN TAPS

Join TAPS in 2024 as we mark 30 years of supporting all those grieving the death of a military or veteran loved one. In honor of our 30th anniversary year, our two national events will come together over Memorial Day weekend. We invite you to join us for this milestone event. Register at taps.org/national/2024 or via the QR code beginning December 1, 2023.



MAY 23-27, 2024

30TH ANNUAL NATIONAL MILITARY SURVIVOR SEMINAR AND GOOD GRIEF CAMP

Arlington, VA

» HERO MILES

Through the generosity of the Fisher House Foundation, TAPS offers a limited number of airline tickets for survivors attending the National Military Survivor Seminar and Good Grief Camp. To help us manage the limited number of airline tickets, and ensure our newest survivors can receive this benefit, priority is given to first-time attendees or those who have not attended a TAPS National Military Survivor Seminar or National Military Suicide Survivor Seminar more than twice. Please only submit a Hero Miles request if:

Please only submit a Hero Miles request if:

- You have not received Hero Miles two or more times and have not had an unused or canceled Hero Miles ticket in the past (other than a ticket impacted by COVID-19 restrictions or illness).
- You are an immediate family member or relative of the deceased service member. Based on the Fisher House criteria, this includes parents, stepparents, legal guardians, spouses, ex-spouses, fiancés, children, adopted children, stepchildren who were raised by the service member, siblings, and stepsiblings.
- You understand that flights are provided at the expense of Fisher House, and, once confirmed and granted, they cannot be canceled or returned. You may be able to make changes to your flight depending on the type of ticket you are issued. You are responsible for any changes made or costs associated with changes. No one else will be allowed to use your ticket.
- You understand that if you decide not to use an issued ticket, there will be a \$150 cancellation or non-use fee per itinerary unless the cancellation is accompanied by a letter from your physician. We appreciate your understanding as we work to honor the gift Fisher House provides to our survivors.
- You agree to complete a separate form with details including your preferred airport and departure and arrival dates. We will send a separate registration link for you to fill out for each attendee if approved.
- You will be flying domestically. Fisher House does not support international flights.

To be considered, your Hero Miles application must be received by March 18, 2024. Our team will determine your eligibility and email a registration link by March 25, 2024.

SCAN THE QR CODE WHEN YOU ARE READY TO BEGIN YOUR APPLICATION.

Flight status notifications and itineraries will be sent no later than May 3, 2024. Email flights@taps.org or call us at 202-588-8277 (TAPS) for assistance.



If you receive a registration link, your flight application cannot be processed until you reserve your hotel and agree that you are responsible for paying the lodging expenses. When reserving a room on our website, be sure the flight request matches the length of your hotel stay. Note that check-in begins on the afternoon of Thursday, May 23, and continues into Friday morning. If you have children attending Good Grief Camp, you must have them there no later than 8 a.m. on Friday, so we ask that you arrive on Thursday. Anyone attending Peer Mentor training should be at the hotel by noon on Friday, May 24.

IN THE NEW YEAR

» MORE 2024 EVENTS



Be sure to check our Events page regularly at taps.org/events. We add and update events throughout the year.

FEBRUARY 23-25
SOUTHEAST REGIONAL
MILITARY SURVIVOR SEMINAR
AND GOOD GRIEF CAMP
Destin, FL

AUGUST 23-25
NORTHEAST REGIONAL
MILITARY SURVIVOR SEMINAR
AND GOOD GRIEF CAMP
Buffalo, NY

MAY 23-27
30TH ANNUAL NATIONAL
MILITARY SURVIVOR SEMINAR
AND GOOD GRIEF CAMP
Arlington, VA

SEPTEMBER 2-9
FAMILY AND FRIENDS
SELF-FUNDED
7-NIGHT ALASKA CRUISE
Seattle, WA

JULY 26-28
WESTERN REGIONAL
MILITARY SURVIVOR SEMINAR
AND GOOD GRIEF CAMP
Scottsdale, AZ

OCTOBER 4-6
SOUTHERN REGIONAL
MILITARY SURVIVOR SEMINAR
AND GOOD GRIEF CAMP
San Antonio, TX

REMEMBER THE *Love,*
CELEBRATE THE *Life,*
SHARE THE *Journey.*



taps.org/caregroups



For more opportunities for growth between events, attend a TAPS Care Group meeting or TAPS Togethers event happening near you or online.



taps.org/tapstogethers

PHOTOS: TAPS ARCHIVES; UNSPLASH.COM/SONNY-MAURICIO



BECOMING Someone's *Why*

During the last week of September, close to **100** military and veteran surviving family members, representing **25** states, walked the halls of the U.S. Capitol led by the TAPS Government Relations and Legislative Affairs team. These survivors, ranging from ages **8** to **76** years old, had one goal — to advocate for **four** key bills that would have a profound impact on their lives, their fellow survivors around the country, and the survivors who will one day walk their path of loss.

Over the course of just **two** days, the attending survivors formed **16** groups and visited **300** congressional offices, meeting with all **50** states, to voice their support for the Love Lives On Act, the Caring for Survivors Act, the Health Care Fairness for Military Families Act, and the CHAMPVA Children's Care Protection Act in an effort to gain support for each piece of legislation.

The numbers are impressive on their own, but they don't tell the whole story. Behind each of those 100-plus survivors in attendance was a story — a story of love, loss, and the challenges of carrying on.

Behind each of those 100-plus survivors was a *why* — a reason they were in this place sharing their stories.

In bravely letting their stories echo through the halls of Congress, these survivors — as TAPS Government and Legislative Affairs Director Candace Wheeler phrased it — “became someone else's *why*.” Lawmakers who sat down to truly hear what these survivors had to say will forever point to that meeting, that story, and that survivor as their *why* for supporting, not only the four pieces of legislation at stake, but any legislation that impacts the families of America's fallen.

To the survivors who advocated with us in person, thank you for sharing your story on behalf of military and veteran survivors nationwide. To our TAPS Family members who were unable to join us, we felt your support. We continue to encourage all survivors and supporters to keep reaching out to legislators. Voice your concerns, and tell your stories — they could become someone else's *why*.



VISIT [TAPS.ORG/ADVOCACY](https://taps.org/advocacy) TO LEARN MORE ABOUT OUR CURRENT EFFORTS AND HOW YOU CAN HELP.



PHOTOS: TAPS ARCHIVES

A Toast

TO THE ONES WE LOST

Sonia Rai ★ Honoring Capt John Graziano, U.S. Air Force

There's a certain type of person with a certain type of heart who, before setting out to do something they love, will see the inherent danger, corruption, and uncertainty ahead of them, and still choose to act anyway.

This is a toast to them.

They're the type of people who aren't in it for the glory because they realize that glory isn't something that can be found, rather it can only be bestowed. So they go, not in search of glory, but with an openness to it and an awareness that it is something that they might glimpse, but never keep.

They're the type of people you fall in love with despite the inherent danger and uncertainty of their way of life because, in a world filled with the atrophied spirits of those who live in search of safety and comfort, they somehow are the only ones who ever seem fully alive.

So when they die, whether it be in a training mishap, in combat, or by suicide or sickness, there's a real sense that we have lost something of which there was already too little: people like them.

It's not so much that "only the good die young," but that only the good truly seem to be alive in the first place.

That's why, when they die, it is — for a while — impossible to see their death as anything other than cruelty. To only be able to speak about them and talk about them seems unjust. Until one day, we begin to realize there is a hidden glory in the stories we tell about them — a kind of glory most people don't understand, but will one day.

Until that day comes, with the pictures, videos, and messages they left behind, and with the stories they wrote on our hearts, we recollect them. And we continue to collect and gather more and more pieces of them which lay hidden in the time stretching out before us.

We show people what we can of them. We pass on glimpses and flashes of the light that they once shone on us, and we trust that people will know it one day — what made them so different, what set them apart, and why they could never be forgotten.

Until that day, we raise a toast to them.

We will remember them and try — impossible as it may be some days — to live with a faith that only their death could bring out of us — a faith that, as David Hart wrote, "set us free from optimism long ago and taught us hope instead."

A toast to the ones we lost yet somehow still keep.

PHOTOS: CANVA.COM/KARTA-SASMITHAS; ISTOCKPHOTO.COM/DELIHAYAT



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

TRAGEDY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM FOR SURVIVORS

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Arlington, VA 22201

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*“Thank you
for all these soft,
sweet things you
have left behind
in my home,
in my head,
in my heart.”*

— Nikita Gill