



Retired Wisconsin Army National Guard Staff Sgt. Brian Jopek, left, carries a toolbox on the set of a public service announcement about Gold Star families June 3 in Los Angeles. Jopek was one of several Gold Star family members to take part in the public service announcements under the auspices of the Army's Survivor Outreach Services.

Retired Guard NCO Honors Son by Raising Awareness

By Vaughn Larson

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The three months between Memorial Day and Aug. 14 are the hardest for Brian Jopek, a retired staff sergeant and combat veteran with the Wisconsin Army National Guard.

He has several emotional landmines to navigate, staggered in a cruel ambush of memories. Memorial Day, of course, allows no escape from remembering because much of the nation is remembering. June 1 is a birthday without its recipient. June 16 is the last time father and son saw each other face to face. July

23 is the anniversary of the last conversation between father and son.

Then comes the day part of Brian's heart was taken from him. On Aug. 2, 2006, Brian lost his oldest son, Sgt. Ryan Jopek, to a roadside bomb near Tikrit, Iraq.

Ryan, deployed with the Wisconsin Army National Guard's 2nd Battalion, 127th Infantry, was returning from his last mission, training Soldiers from the Wisconsin National Guard's 1st Battalion, 121st Field Artillery to take over the job he had been doing for

the past year.

Brian was not allowed to open Ryan's casket upon its return to Wisconsin. Ryan David Jopek, killed two months after his 20th birthday, was buried Aug. 14 in Merrill, Wis. President Barack Obama wore a bracelet bearing Ryan's name during the 2008 presidential campaign.

For the past seven years Brian has kept his son's memory alive in many ways. He uses Ryan's portrait as his Facebook profile image. He takes Ryan's rebuilt 1966 Chevrolet pickup — nicknamed "Walter" after Ryan's favorite football player, Walter Payton — to area car shows, adorned with memorabilia about his son. He has one Gold Star Family license plate that reads "23JULY," the date of his last conversation with Ryan, and another that reads "1JUN86," the day Ryan was born.

It is in the midst of this season of painful memories that Brian and his daughter Jessica Holmgren traveled to Los Angeles — courtesy of the Army's Survivor Outreach Services — one of 35 Gold Star parents, spouses and siblings to take part in three 30-second public service announcements about the meaning of the Gold Star pin.

The need for this awareness campaign was underscored for Brian during a recent car show, when a woman asked him what the Gold Star flag on Ryan's truck meant. "She just didn't know," Brian said. "She had no ties to the military whatsoever."

Nearly 100 years ago, families would display red-bordered flags with blue stars in their windows to indicate a family member was deployed overseas during war. A gold star indicates that the service

member was killed in action.

Brian was also struck by the diversity among the Gold Star family members who took part in the PSA project. Some had spent their entire careers in the military, while others had no military background outside of their fallen family member.

"They were everyday people, for the most part, who just got caught up in it," Brian observed. "That's what hits you."

Jessica shared her memories of Ryan for a PSA titled "Unsung Heroes."

Brian portrayed a construction worker for another PSA that provided a platform for a Gold Star father to explain the meaning of the Gold Star pin to a coworker.

Brian wore his own Gold Star pin on the set, even though it would not be seen in the PSA.

"I was doing it for Ryan," he said. "Anything I can do to get that awareness out there ... what it means to the country."

For Brian, life without his oldest son isn't getting easier, but he is getting better at coping.

"There are times when you can't help but think about him," Brian explained. "Every day I think about him. Every hour. The difference is how I handle it now as opposed to seven years ago. It takes time. But there will always be that sense ... would he be married now? Would he still be in the National Guard?"

The PSAs are initially intended to air on the Armed Forces Network and The Pentagon Channel. Eventually, Brian said, the goal is to have the PSAs air this fall on local stations as well as during college and NFL football games. ■



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