

# USASMA Course Prepares Husbands, Wives for New Responsibilities as Spouses of Senior Enlisted

By Meghan Portillo - NCO Journal

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At the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy at Fort Bliss, Texas, the Army's newest sergeants major are not the only ones preparing for major life changes. The students' spouses are also developing their own leadership skills in the academy's Spouse Leadership Development Course.





Dody Myers, right, joins other spouses of USASMA students for a lecture on the American Red Cross. Throughout the Spouse Leadership Development Course, the spouses learn about programs available to Army families. (Photo by Meghan Portillo / NCO Journal)

The 42-hour course prepares spouses of senior enlisted Soldiers for the leadership support positions they will take on within their military communities. Lectures and small group discussions focus on topics such as conflict management, protocol, public speaking and team building. Senior spouses' roles within the Family Readiness Group are discussed in detail, as well as military benefits and the multitude of programs and resources available to Army families. Examinations are not conducted, but the students are required to give a presentation. The course's vision is to expand senior spouses' leadership capacity, broaden their opportunities and recognize their significant contribution to readiness.

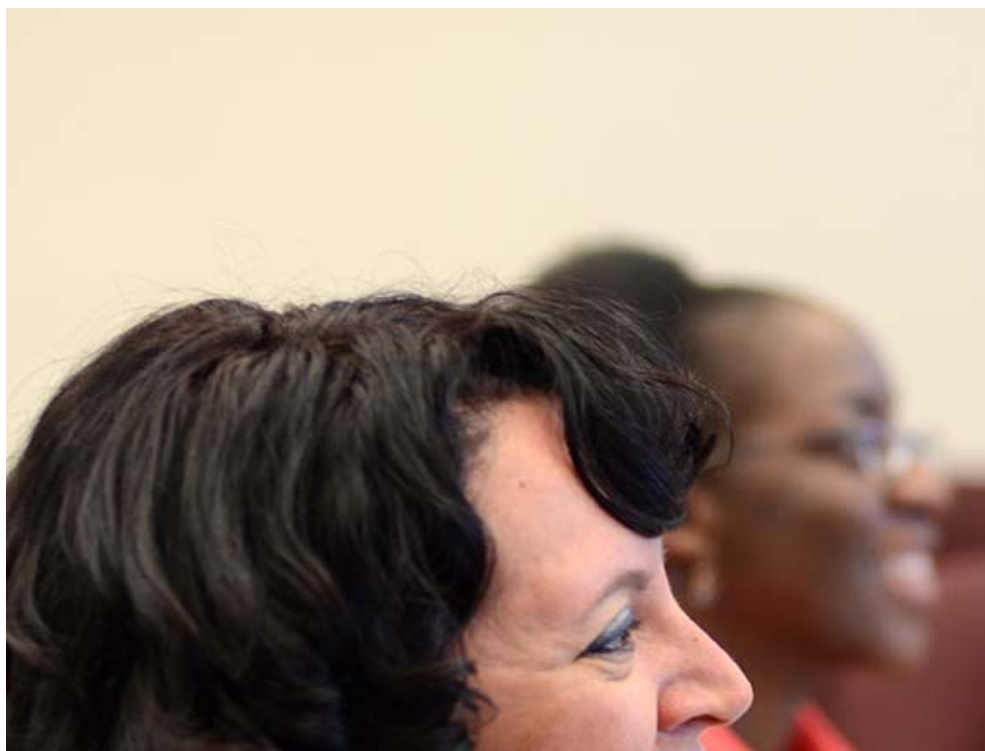
"Among the many topics in SLDC, we introduce spouses to the aspects of senior level protocol and etiquette, media engagement, and the use of social media," said Sgt. Maj. Melissa O'Brien, SLDC director. "They are about to be the face and voice of a new command supporting their military spouse during changes of command, changes of responsibility, memorial ceremonies, along with a whole host of other installation events. Our goal is for spouses to understand how their role transitions into one of leadership support beyond the company, battery, or troop level where many of them actively served as Family Readiness Group leaders. They bring a wealth of experience and knowledge, but now it is time for them to mentor young spouses to carry on the role as FRG leaders."

The course, offered about once a month, is almost always full. Though it is designed for the spouses of students attending USASMA, the course is open to spouses of sergeants first class and above at Fort Bliss. Spouses from other installations, the Army Reserve and National Guard are also welcome to attend, but they are required to pay for their travel expenses.

"I've been a command sergeant major coming up on a dozen years now," said Command Sgt. Maj. Dennis Defreese, USASMA's commandant. "Depending on talent and ambition, Soldiers may spend 30 or 40 percent of their entire career as E9s. That is a long stretch for the spouse, too, with those kinds of community obligations. Having this training will make it a lot easier on that spouse from the start."

## A new role

Much of the information covered in SLDC would benefit any military spouse, Defreese said, but the course also addresses the specific commitments and social changes facing the spouses of sergeants major.



"You are going to be a senior leader within your community, even if you don't wear a uniform. Those spouses are a part of the senior culture and social group of a community on post, so that's why it's a little different for them," Defreese said.

One of the major changes a senior spouse faces is that of his or her role in the FRG, said Jane Defreese, the commandant's wife. Spouses of senior enlisted Soldiers are no longer leaders, but instead advisors, she explained.

Each company/battery/troop has an FRG, and the leaders of each are "down there in the nitty gritty, doing everything they can," Jane Defreese said. Advisors at the



Barb O'Neill attends a lecture during the Spouse Leadership Development Course at USASMA. (Photo by Meghan Portillo / NCO Journal)

battalion, brigade and division levels, on the other hand, are there to make sure the leaders have the right information and the support they need.

"I love the first day when my husband and I go in and talk to the class and tell them, 'You are no longer going to be the FRG leader. You are now going to be an advisor,' and they get wide-eyed and a little nervous about that term," Jane Defreese said. "But by the end of the course, they are more comfortable, and they know what their roles are going to be. They know it is important for them to step back and let the FRG leaders do their thing."

Rochelle Blue, who attended the first SLDC of Sergeants Major Course Class 66, said she learned so much in the course, even though she had been a senior spouse for seven years.

"Before I took the class, I thought I had to go in and be in charge of all these things," Blue said. "But now I know I'm more of an advisor; I'm the one who goes in and looks over things. I am supposed to see how I can make things better, how I can help spouses and their families. And I absolutely love it; because it takes a strong military family to support their Soldier. And now that I know the best way I can help, I'm excited about it.

"I know it is difficult because there is often no one to explain your role as a spouse and how it changes when your spouse is promoted," Blue said. "I think if more spouses had this class, they would feel more comfortable stepping up into that leadership position. If you go in blind, of course you are going to be afraid. You are afraid you might embarrass your spouse because you don't know what is going on. This course has opened my eyes and made me more confident. Now I know and understand not only how to help support my husband, but I know what to do on my end."

### **'Resources, not rescues'**

If a family has an issue, especially during a deployment or when their Soldier is away for training, senior spouses within the FRG will point them in the right direction to find the help they need. SLDC strives to arm the spouses with the resources they need to address any situation.

Some of the programs overviewed during the course include the Association of the United States Army, bereavement clubs, the American Red Cross and Survivors Outreach Services.

"I wish I had taken this course when I became a senior spouse seven years ago, because I gained so much valuable information that I could have been using," Blue said. "For example, I hadn't realized the depth of what the American Red Cross has to offer. And Survivors Outreach Services – I never even knew they existed. I was so excited to hear about it, because they offer so





many things to help families get through those hard times. I really learned so much. I hope more spouses want to jump in and take this course so we can support each other and build a stronger military – both on the spouses' side and the Soldiers' side, together. It takes both.”

### Learning from each other

One of the goals of SLDC is to create an environment where the spouses can learn from each other. Though their husbands or wives all hold the same rank, the spouses in the class come to the table with many different experiences. Some have been military spouses for 20 years. Others, like Mike Menold, are new to the Army.

“It makes for a very interesting group,”

Menold said. “My wife

works for U.S. Army Recruiting Command, so we are new to living on post. And being a newbie spouse, and a guy – I was the only guy in our class – I brought a different dynamic in the sense that it's a different world outside of the military. Most of the spouses are used to living on post and accustomed to moving every three to five years. A lot of them talked about what they want to do with their lives now that their kids are grown. Some of them are grandmothers. And here is this 50-year-old guy saying, ‘Yeah, I've got a 4-and-a-half-year-old, and I'm just starting.’ Talking to them about what it is like becoming a parent later in life and how much more I appreciate it, they embraced that. We really did learn from each other.”

Not only do the spouses in SLDC learn from each other, they build a support system. Before they leave USASMA, they have forged a network with other spouses on whom they can rely for help and guidance.

“I loved meeting all the other spouses,” Blue said. “I learned that I am not alone, that we have a lot in common. I built new friendships and a new support group – even after the course, we still talk and come up with new ideas. I know I can count on these other spouses who went through the course with me.”

### Adapting the course to student's needs

To make the class accessible to as many spouses as possible, USASMA offers two evening courses each semester from 5 to 10 p.m. The late course is the only option for many spouses, who, like Blue, work or attend classes during the day.

“It was tough because I was at school all day and then at SLDC at night,” Blue said. “I am glad they offer that though; because in today's military, a lot of the spouses are not stay-at-home moms or dads. They have careers or school; they are working toward things. I am really glad they offered the night course so I had the opportunity to attend.”

The academy also offers a condensed course for international spouses that focuses more on the social and team-building aspects instead of U.S. programs and resources that would not be available to them in their countries.



Nadia Wheeler attends a lecture as part of the Spouse Leadership Development Course at USASMA. (Photo by Meghan Portillo / NCO Journal)

"In most countries, spouses have no involvement with the military," Dennis Defreese said. "Even England – their spouses are not involved with the military at all. However, attending this course still benefits them, because it goes back to being an effective communicator. It's about being part of a social group and understanding other people's reactions and personalities."

Theresa Murch, who is at Fort Bliss with her husband while he attends the Sergeants Major Course, said that even though the dynamics between spouses in Australia are completely different, she learned a lot in the course that will be helpful to her back home.

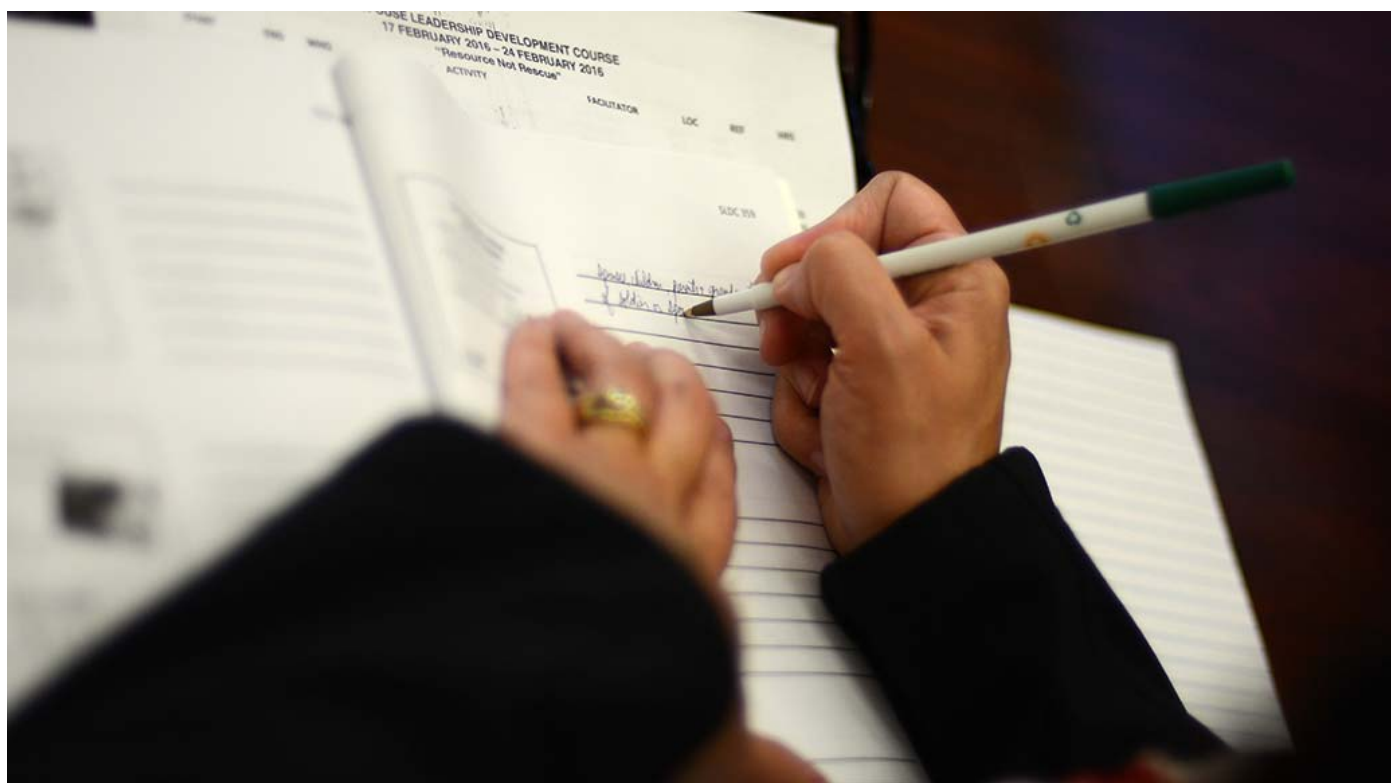
"I enjoyed hearing about how America does it, because your Army is run quite differently from ours, and if I can learn something to take back to my country, all the better," she said.

Murch said her favorite part of the course was when she and her classmates were required to give a presentation on a topic of their choice.

"I didn't know what to talk about, but it made me step out of my comfort zone. And the other women who don't speak English as well – they all got up and did such a great job. I was so proud of them."

Murch's class brought together spouses from the United States, Turkey, Jordan, Brazil, Bosnia, Japan and Macedonia.

"In some countries, spouses have no involvement in the Army whatsoever," she said. "But I think, even for those countries, learning a little bit – even if you know just one person who you could help – it is a productive course."



The Spouse Leadership Development Course at the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy at Fort Bliss, Texas, prepares spouses of enlisted Soldiers for leadership support positions within the military community. (Photo by Meghan Portillo / NCO Journal)