

A LEGACY OF GRATITUDE

By MACY MOORE



THERE ARE NEARLY 20 million military veterans and 1.46 million military service members in the United States. As a nation, we celebrate veterans and service members but one aspect of the military is far too often overlooked: the 2 million children of current soldiers and veterans.

Lee Sechrist, a veteran and former army officer founded Gratitude Initiative, a non-profit organization providing essential education programs and scholarships for children of veterans,

including those wounded in action.

“As a disabled veteran, I understand that these families have been through so much, and there’s no greater way to honor their

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service and sacrifice than by providing for their child’s future,” Sechrist says. “The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have had

the most stress on our volunteer force since the 1970s. Their children have been stuck at home, so the families are dealing with challenges, and no one is focusing on the children. That’s where we step in.”

The childhood of those with at least one parent in the military tends to be inconsistent and stressful with the lingering possibility of moving to another location. “One of the key challenges that military children face is that they move a lot,” says Joan Quintana, Advisory Board Member for Gratitude Initiative. “It’s hard moving school to school, finding out where you fit in academically, and there tends to be some academic losses associated with all of those moves.”

Gratitude Initiative provides various education programs, career counseling, college counseling, test preparation, teaching parents about financial aid, online tutoring, and much more. These services are completely free and begin as early as the eighth grade.

GI students are put through an online preparatory program, GI College Success Academy, designed to help a student anywhere

on the globe where their parents are stationed.

“The goal is that when they apply for colleges, they’ll be such a great academic fit for that school, that they’ll maximize their financial aid opportunities at that school,” says Sechrist. It’s no secret that many students entering college are not college ready; it takes practice to learn proper time management and study skills. As such, GI students are required to take a college readiness course prior to their first college semester.

Gratitude Initiative reaches children worldwide through Skype, phone, and email. “We are using technology in a way that children and families understand,” says Sechrist. “We are centrally located, but there will be live people available to talk whenever needed.”

With a goal to enroll 2,000 kids a year into the academic programs, Gratitude Initiative is well on the way to changing the lives of military children.

“When a student graduates from college, it not only positively affects him or her, but it affects their children and their children’s children, and also has a positive impact on their parents,” says Sechrist. “We like to say it creates a legacy of gratitude.” *i*

In order to raise awareness for the 2 million military children, the House and Texas Senate will declare a Gratitude Initiative Kids Day, or GI Kids Day. State representative John Raney will sponsor the event and has been eager to jump on board with the mission. Held January 27, GI Kids Day will take place at the Texas Capital in Austin.

What: Gratitude Initiative Kids Day

When: January 27

Where: Texas State Capital, Austin

For more information, visit www.gratitudeinitiative.org