

For the Loved Ones of Those Who Served and Died

# TAPS®

TRAGEDY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM FOR SURVIVORS

SUMMER 2024



Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Charles Q. Brown Jr. speaks at the 30<sup>th</sup> Annual TAPS National Military Survivor Seminar.



I talk about him because I am  
the memory keeper of a life  
that exists only in my mind.

I talk about him to remember  
and honor who he was and  
his impact in this world.

I will always talk about  
him because, for me,  
he's still here, woven into  
everything I am and do.

— MARIE-CLAUDE GOUDREAU





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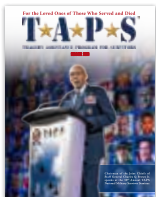
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### TAPS PROGRAMS & SERVICES

- 24/7 National Military Survivor Helpline
  - Survivor Care Team
  - Peer-Based Support Network
  - Community-Based Care
  - Casework Assistance
  - Education Support
  - Suicide Loss & Illness Loss Support
  - Care Groups
  - Online Community
  - TAPS Institute for Hope and Healing®
  - Survivor Seminars & Good Grief Camps
  - TAPS Togethers
  - Women's Empowerment
  - Men's Program
  - Young Adults Program
  - Youth Programs
  - Sports & Entertainment Events
- \* For full descriptions, see pages 18-19.



**ON THE COVER:** Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Charles Q. Brown Jr. speaks at the 30th Annual TAPS National Military Survivor Seminar over Memorial Day weekend. His presence, powerful remarks, and ongoing support of the TAPS mission are a tribute to the lives lost in defense of freedom and a reminder of the U.S. military's commitment to caring for the families of the fallen. COVER PHOTO: TAPS ARCHIVES

## 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.

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### *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.

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TAPS exceeds industry standards for financial accountability and outperforms most charities. We are proud to have received many of the top nonprofit charity ratings available today. Our donors should be confident they are supporting an organization that is financially healthy, accountable, and transparent.





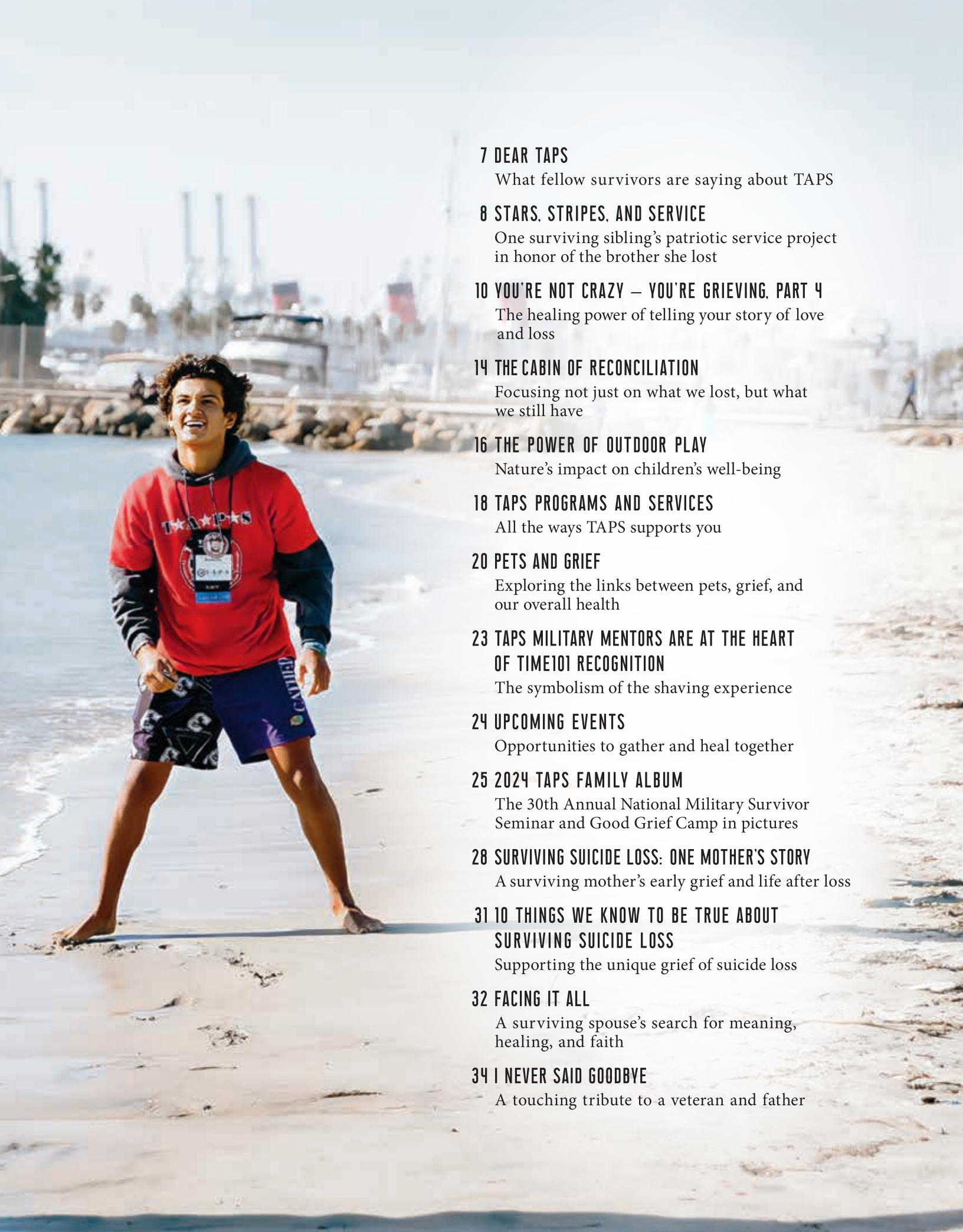


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# To Our TAPS Family,



Welcome to our summer 2024 issue of *TAPS Magazine*, our chance to bring all the care, comfort, and community of TAPS to you wherever you are in your grief journey, and wherever you are around the globe. No matter the miles between us, we are bonded because we are traveling this road together, forever remembering and honoring loved ones whose lives included selfless service to America.

Through TAPS, you are surrounded by the love and support of your peers, an incredible amount of critical resources, and an extraordinary family who truly understands your grief journey. Your life may be marked by tragedy, but it can also be punctuated with hope, resilience, faith, and meaning. We are all now our loved ones' living legacies.

Each of us has a unique story to tell. The articles in this issue capture some of those personal stories. You might see yourself in a fellow survivor's writing as you read about their search for meaning after loss, their challenges in navigating a new world without their loved one, their healing after a trauma that complicated their grief, or their dedication to honoring the legacy of their hero. I hope these stories help you reflect on your own journey and inspire you to pursue the healing you need and, when you're ready, share what you know with survivors who will follow you.

As I think about the precious moments spent with so many of you at our 30th Annual TAPS National Military Survivor Seminar and Good Grief Camp over Memorial Day weekend, I am so very proud of the strength of our community. From the opening session in the Grand Ballroom to all of the workshop sessions to the personal peer-to-peer conversations over coffee between events, healing and connection were happening all around us.

Our annual gathering — which you'll see featured later in this issue — isn't the only opportunity to connect with your TAPS Family throughout the year, though. At this very moment, a Peer Mentor may be checking in on a mentee on a particularly hard day. Survivors may be logging into their recurring Online Group meeting. Someone, somewhere is phoning our 24/7 Helpline to inquire about TAPS Casework or Education Support Services. The TAPS Institute for Hope and Healing® provides ways to grow with grief online, without leaving home. Our Adult, Youth, and Young Adult Programs all create opportunities for peer groups to meet in healing settings nationwide. TAPS Togethers and Care Groups build community all over the map, and through Team TAPS and teams4taps, heroes are honored in incredible ways connected to sport.

I encourage you to explore all the ways your TAPS Family can support you. Visit our website, [taps.org](https://taps.org); connect with us on social media, @tapsorg; or call our Helpline at 202-588-TAPS (8277) any time to learn more and take the first step toward healing your grieving heart and honoring the hero who brought you to this community.

With gratitude and comfort,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Bonnie".

Bonnie Carroll, *TAPS President and Founder*



PHOTOS: TAPS ARCHIVES



# DEAR

# TAPS

## BONDED BY LOSS

“Our family is so grateful for your steadfast support and the love we receive from Peer Mentors, seminars, Good Grief Camps, and online resources and videos. We are especially thankful when we are all together in person, bonding over the loss of our precious loved ones. We honor and miss Adam terribly, and today will be no harder than the other days, longing for just one more moment with him, but we take comfort in the TAPS Family we are now part of, today and always.”

**CAROL VENDZULES**  
SURVIVING MOTHER OF CPL ADAM VENDZULES,  
U.S. MARINE CORPS

## INSPIRED READING

“I can’t thank you enough for remembering and for sending me the articles that were so helpful, as I’m already dreading the anniversary of Rob’s death. A year ago, we flew to Paris for the late celebration of our 22nd anniversary, and I can still remember how excited we were — looking forward to the trip we had planned for months. Even though it ended in a way neither of us could have ever expected, I often look back at our photos of that adventure and remember how much fun we had, and all of the sweet gestures of love between us while we celebrated our anniversary, which was May 4th. I think the suggestions in these articles will really help me decide how I want to remember that day, and they nudged me to start thinking about what the two of us would have found most meaningful. I remember that last day we were so happy, and he said to me, ‘This is one of the best days of my life.’ I will do my best to honor his memory by making the months and years we should have had together now full of memories and happiness wherever it can be found. I know he would have wanted that too.”

**KATHERINE NIELSEN**  
SURVIVING SPOUSE OF SN ROBERT “ROB” NIELSEN, U.S. NAVY

## MORE THAN WORDS

“I try to end each day with a reminder of something to be grateful for. Today, it was your phone call, and that I answered your call. Thank you so much for the time you spent with me on the phone, for your kind patience and support, and for all the information you provided for me in your email. All of it is more genuinely appreciated than words can express.”

**ANNE SMITH**  
SURVIVING SPOUSE OF CHARLES “CHRIS” SMITH,  
U.S. ARMY

## PAY IT FORWARD

“The loss of my father to suicide was a tremendous change in my life. Not only was it extremely difficult for me to process, it changed my family dynamics and made it very difficult to be a family. My Peer Mentor meant so much to me — just knowing I was not the only one to have gone through this. It gave me hope to know it was possible to survive that event and even flourish after. There is almost no way to prepare for such an event, nor do we live our lives in such a way that we can immediately cope properly with what happened. I feel deep down that it is now my turn to help others through their journey. As I was once helped (and still am to this day), I would like to pay it forward.”

**JACOB ANTHONY**  
SURVIVING SON OF MSGT STEPHEN ANTHONY,  
U.S. AIR FORCE



Visit [taps.org/deartaps](https://taps.org/deartaps) to let us know how TAPS has impacted your life after loss. Your words may just be what a fellow survivor needs to hear to take the first step toward healing.

[taps.org/deartaps](https://taps.org/deartaps)

# STARS, STRIPES, *and*

Dawn Kotalik ★ Surviving Mother of SPC Jarrett Kotalik, U.S. Army

Kristi Stolzenberg ★ Editor, *TAPS Magazine*

Service is something of a tradition in the Kotalik family. During WWII, a paratrooper with that last name landed in Normandy, and his legacy inspired future generations of Kotaliks to follow in his footsteps, including his great-grandson, U.S. Army SPC Jarrett Kotalik, who enlisted in the military at the age of 17. But, for Jarrett, his brothers, and his one sister, Grace, service started in childhood — pitching in with relief efforts after Hurricane Harvey in 2017, and pouring energy into their Eagle Scout community service projects.

Sadly, while assigned to the 82nd Airborne Division at Fort Liberty, Jarrett passed away on July 10, 2023. As the Kotalik family mourned the loss of their beloved son and brother, Grace turned to service, and through her Eagle Scout project, she found an outlet for the grief and pride she held in her heart for Jarrett. Drawing inspiration from Jarrett's service heart and deep patriotism, Grace set out to earn the title of Eagle Scout in the wake of tragedy.

## THE Project

Grace began her Eagle Scout project by building a flag collection box in honor

of her brother that featured her own artwork and details from the life he lived — all his favorite things. One collection box soon became five collection boxes — each a personalized memorial to another fallen hero — placed in key locations in Grace's community. Each box told the story of someone who bravely served, ensuring their memory carried on in everyone who passed by. The boxes also served as receptacles for U.S. flags that had proudly flown and were ready to be retired after growing tattered, torn, and sun-bleached.

By the numbers, Grace led a team of 92 volunteers — including fellow scouts, family, and friends — for a total of 1,777 service hours, across 50 service event days, and 708 flags collected for retirement at a series of ceremonies throughout her project, including the largest ceremony on March 9.

## THE Ceremony

At the March 9 flag retirement ceremony at the outdoor amphitheater at Camp Strake, near Coldspring, TX, it was clear to all in attendance that Grace, with the support of her proud family, had given attention to even the smallest details.

From start to finish, the flag retirement ceremony ran three hours, with an 80-page run of show. The names of fallen heroes were shared as scout volunteers respectfully placed 406 American flags into fire rings to be retired.

The ceremony began with a moving presentation that replicated the opening of the Basic Training graduation ceremony at Fort Jackson, SC, where Jarrett graduated in January 2020, and buglers from Troops 1777 and 777 played taps during key moments throughout the event.

Several Gold Star Families were there to support Grace and represent the hero they lost. Grace took extra care to involve them in the ceremony and honor their loved ones. Kim and Carl Ball were there representing their son, U.S. Air Force TSgt Cody Ball. "Each Gold Star Family," they shared, "was presented a flag to be retired in their hero's name. It meant so much to hear our son's name spoken out loud with such honor." Their son, Cody, is memorialized on Grace's Air Force flag collection box.

After the 406th flag was retired that day, the ceremony concluded, but Grace's dedication to serving her community and honoring the fallen continued.

## THE REST OF THE Story

After the March 9 ceremony, Grace and her team of volunteers preserved and sifted through the ashes to collect over 700 flag grommets, which she busily began turning into individual commemorative pieces for fellow surviving family members — including many members of the TAPS Family.

Since her March 9 ceremony, Grace has held two follow-on ceremonies to retire more





# Service



weathered and worn U.S. flags from her community and honor even more heroes who bravely defended the flag through military service.

Grace's project bloomed into much more than a requirement to earn the title of Eagle Scout. By adding the element of honor to a very practical means of flag retirement, she kept the names of heroes present; she passed on their stories; and she brought surviving families in her community together.

"Our Matthew was honored and a flag retired in his memory," shared Milissa and John Guyon. "What a precious opportunity to hear his name and to stand alongside other Gold Star Families."

Surviving Parents Margie and Jeff Taylor shared, "It was so good to hear Joey's name spoken." The Taylor's son, SPC Joey Lenz is honored on Grace's U.S. Army flag collection box.

Joyce Fontenot, the surviving mother of U.S. Army PFC Trent J. Fontenot praised Grace's event, saying, "I'm so glad that I came. I got to hear Trent's name spoken out loud, and you know what that means to us. My heart is glad."

Grace made quite the impact in her little corner of Texas, and her impact reaches surviving military and veteran families

far beyond her hometown. The heart and personal grief she poured into her Eagle Scout service project was evident to all involved, including the board who reviewed her advancement to Eagle Scout on April 24. For all her effort, leadership, organization, patriotism, and community service, Grace Kotalik is now an Eagle Scout.

Grace proudly supported her brother, Jarrett — cheering him on in everything he did. Though he can't be with her now, she supports him still — telling his story, saying his name, honoring his military service, and using what she learned from him to serve others.

*"Stars, Stripes, and Service" is a follow-up to the article, "Honor to Serve," published on taps.org in March 2024.*



Are you interested in connecting with fellow military and veteran survivors in your community? Consider attending a TAPS Togethers event or TAPS Care Group meeting in your area for the comfort of TAPS close to home.



[taps.org/tapstogethers](https://taps.org/tapstogethers)



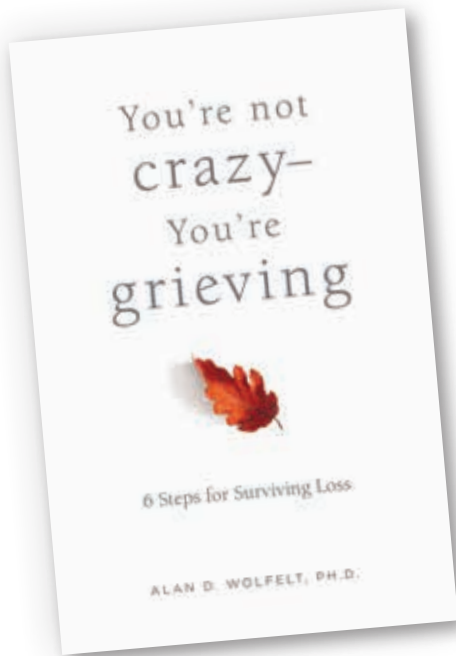
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# You're not crazy —

## PART 4

## Telling Your Stories Helps You Survive

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



*This article is part four in a series of six. Parts one through three were published in the summer 2023, fall 2023, and spring 2024 issues of TAPS Magazine.*

Telling your stories of love and loss helps you survive. The more you allow yourself to tell your stories, the easier it will be to embark on a healthy path toward integrating loss into your life.

### Going Backward Before Forward

Since your loss, some of your well-meaning, but misinformed friends and family

members have probably been telling you some version of:

- He or she would want you to keep living your life.
- Time heals all wounds.
- Just keep putting one foot in front of the other.
- You need to put the past in the past.
- It's time to move on.

Not only do these oft-repeated clichés diminish your significant and unique loss, they imply that moving forward — in your life and in time — is what will ease your suffering. In other words, they encourage you to keep on keeping on. But the truth is, paradoxically, in grief, you have to go backward before you can go forward. There is no “moving on” until you first allow your mind and heart to return to the past as often and as long as they need to.

Our cultural misconception about moving forward in grief stems in part from the concept of the “stages of grief,” popularized in 1969 by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’ landmark text, *On Death and Dying*. In this important book, Dr. Kübler-Ross listed the five stages of grief that she saw terminally ill patients experience in the face of their own impending deaths: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. However, she never intended for her five stages to be interpreted as a rigid, linear process to be followed by all mourners.

Grief is definitely not orderly, predictable, or stage-like. Instead, it is more of a “getting lost in the woods” experience. And it is recursive. This means that it twists and switches back. It’s shaped more like a random, meandering path than a straight line. When it turns back on itself, it tends to cover the same ground more than once. If you’re angry for a while, for example, you will probably feel your anger return in fits and spurts in the months to come. In fact, every pronounced feeling in grief usually requires repetition to eventually soften and become reconciled.

Grief is not even a “two steps forward, one step backward” kind of dance. Instead, it is often a “one step forward, two steps in a circle, one step sideways” process. It takes lots of time, patience, and, yes, backward motion before forward motion starts to predominate.

### Telling the Story of the Death Itself

Often the first backward-looking part of the story that needs to be explored and revisited in very early grief is the most recent: the death itself.

In previous articles, we reviewed how shock and disbelief are normal and necessary at this time. The death of someone loved often feels unbelievable, even when the death was expected. Our minds and hearts need not only time, but also to reencounter the reality of the death over and over before they can begin to comprehend and absorb

**Grief is definitely not orderly, predictable, or stage-like. Instead, it is more of a “getting lost in the woods” experience.**



# You're grieving

what happened. Death is just naturally difficult to fully comprehend.

Initially (and maybe still today), you may have found your thoughts returning to the circumstances, moments, and what-ifs of the death day over and over again. This is normal.

It may be normal, but I know it is also painful. Still, over time, the act of expressing those thoughts outside of yourself begins to soften the blow of the reality as well as the pain. Telling the story to compassionate people you feel safe with — people who are nonjudgmental and good listeners — helps you acknowledge and begin to integrate this difficult reality into your life.

Talking in groups about what happened also helps. Writing in a journal about what happened helps, too. Being open and transparent on the outside about what you're thinking and feeling on the inside always helps, even when it feels scary or painful at first.

So yes, talking about the death helps heal the acute wound. This is counterintuitive to many people. How can talking about a terrible, painful reality possibly make it better? But here's the thing: You're thinking about the reality anyway. You probably can't stop your mind from

returning to it. This is a central feature of your inner grief. But sharing your thoughts outside of yourself — in other words, mourning those same thoughts and feelings — relieves some of the inner pressure. It also slowly begins to help you grow to acknowledge what seems, at first, like an impossibility.

Mr. Rogers famously said, "Anything that's human is mentionable, and anything that is mentionable can be more manageable. When we can talk about our feelings, they become less overwhelming, less upsetting, and less scary."

Of course, Mr. Rogers was right. So, whenever you find yourself thinking over and over about the facts or circumstances surrounding the death, I encourage you to try expressing those thoughts outside of yourself in some way. In fact, this is a good general principle in grief.





point, you may find that putting together photo books and memory boxes is a transformative activity. Going through the person's belongings is another facet of remembering. Writing down anecdotes and biographical information is also an excellent way to explore memories.

### But Remembering Hurts!

Yes, it does. Remembering often hurts, especially in the early weeks. It can feel like rubbing salt into the wound. Why on earth would you want to do that? Have you found yourself avoiding photos, belongings, certain people and places, foods, music, and other things precisely so you can avoid the pain of remembering and getting hit by the terrible reality of the death over and over again?

In the very early days and weeks, it's natural to avoid actively placing yourself in the path of even more memories. Your mind and heart are already struggling to absorb the reality. At the funeral, I hope memories were shared in supportive ways. We know that this is one of the most important functions of ceremony at a time of death. And for some weeks after the funeral, you no doubt had to take care of a lot of paperwork and practical details having to do with the death — plus receive visitors, cards, emails, texts, flowers, food, and more. Conversations with people you haven't yet spoken to about the death invite you to reencounter the wound of your grief.

So in these early weeks, remembering isn't really optional. During this challenging period, it's OK to do (and not do) whatever you need to do to feel safe and comforted as much as possible.

and people share stories. It's hard to grasp everything at this time, and many memories can feel especially painful.

Whenever you're thinking or feeling anything about the death, try sharing it outside of yourself somehow. Expression is what eventually generates forward momentum in integrating your loss and helping you heal.

### Actively Exploring Memories

In very early grief — the first days and weeks — memories often come in a chaotic rush. Photos are gathered for the funeral,

If you are still in those really early days, you're probably struggling with shock and numbness. You might not feel ready to sit down with a photo album. You may not be able to remember all the stories others are sharing with you. If so, this is normal. Give yourself some time to survive the first weeks before focusing on actively exploring memories.

When you do feel ready, make time to encounter your memories in doses. Set aside half an hour here or an hour there to look through photos and videos. At some

TAPS can support you when you are ready to tell your story of love and loss. Find a Care Group in your area to join a community of survivors near you or register for one of our Online Group meetings, organized by relationship, peer group, and cause of death. Connection and compassionate peer support are ready when you are.



[taps.org/onlinegroups](https://taps.org/onlinegroups)



[taps.org/caregroups](https://taps.org/caregroups)

PHOTOS: TAPS ARCHIVES; DR. ALAN D. WOLFELT



As time passes, your love will remain strong,  
but the constant yearning will begin to soften.

But a time will come when actively remembering — gathering, cultivating, and lingering over memories — will provide that backward motion you need to eventually pick up healing momentum and be able to move yourself forward.

Telling the Story of  
Their Ongoing Love

After the death, you continue to love the person who died. As the dying old man, Morrie, said in Mitch Albom's bestselling memoir *Tuesdays with Morrie*, "Death ends a life, not a relationship."

So as you tell the story of the death and the life of the person who died, don't forget to also look for opportunities to tell the story of your ongoing love. In fact, your grief is your love now, when the object of your love has gone.

In early grief, finding comfort and sustenance in your continued love for the person who died usually feels

like yearning. Perhaps you have been experiencing this. You miss the person so much, and you want them back here with you. It can be a persistent ache. This is painful, but it's also normal. When it happens, try telling the story of what it feels like. In conversation with others, bring up all the hows, whens, whys, wheres, and ways in which you miss them.

As time passes, your love will remain strong, but the constant yearning will begin to soften. This will be a sign that you are integrating the reality of the death into your continued life. As this happens, you can continue to cherish your love for the person who died by telling the story of their life. Using their name, sharing anecdotes, celebrating special days associated with the person, holding gatherings in their memory, and honoring them on holidays and special occasions are just a few ways to keep telling the story of their life and your ongoing love for them.



About the Author

*Dr. Alan Wolfelt is recognized as one of North America's leading death educators and grief counselors. His books on grief for both caregivers and grieving people — including You're Not Crazy — You're Grieving, from which this article series is adapted — have sold more than a million copies worldwide and are translated into many languages. He is the founder and director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition and a TAPS Advisory Board Member. Visit [centerforloss.com](http://centerforloss.com) or email Dr. Wolfelt at [drwolfelt@centerforloss.com](mailto:drwolfelt@centerforloss.com) for more information.*





# The Cabin of

Jon W. Ganues ★ Manager, TAPS Men's Program

Relationships in families change all the time, but they can sometimes change dramatically after the death of a loved one. Some relationships become very close, while some drift apart. Sometimes, the changes are obvious, and other times they are not.

On June 2, 2009, I received notification that one of my sons, Jon Wesley Ganues Jr., died by suicide while serving in the U.S. Air Force. He was a security policeman stationed at Moody Air Force Base in Valdosta, Georgia. His death changed the lives of our family and his friends forever in so many ways.

Years after Wesley's death, my relationship with my younger son, RaShawn, was distant. It was cordial, but distant. An opportunity to attend a TAPS Men's Retreat in Montana in 2017 gave us a chance to spend time together. We ended up in a cabin by ourselves, something I had hoped for. As the event progressed, we had a good time together and talked about many things. However, there was still an elephant in the room, and we had not addressed it.

## ADDRESSING THE ELEPHANT IN THE CABIN

One afternoon, everyone had downtime prior to reconvening as a group. RaShawn and I made our way back to our cabin to relax and get warm. We used that time alone in our cabin to address things that stood in the way of our relationship. I realized how crucial it was for us to have this moment in a neutral location. We had things to work through to erode the distance between us as father and son.

I was terrified before he spoke, unaware of what would be said or how I would respond. I hadn't felt terror like that before, and I had thoughts of losing him forever swirling in my head. There was tension in the air as we started to tear into this package of the unknown.

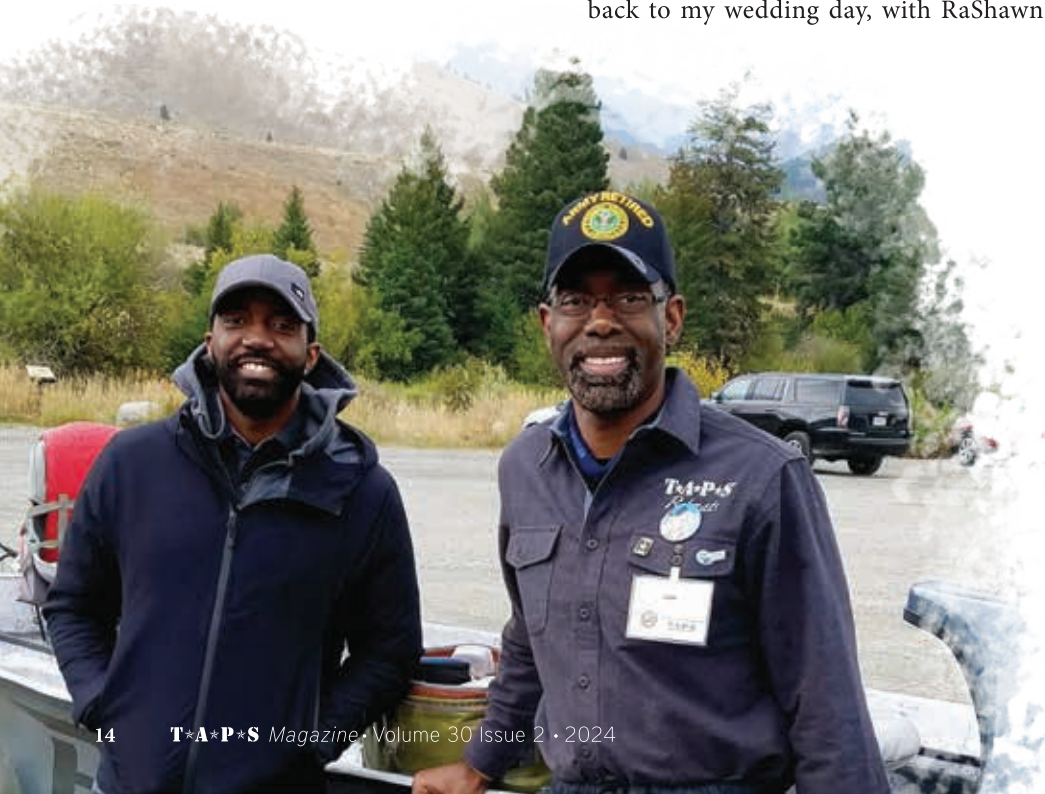
RaShawn very calmly, but passionately, told me how he felt before and after Wesley died. He spoke of feeling abandoned when I remarried with stepchildren and moved away to Florida with my new family. This made me think back to my wedding day, with RaShawn



and Wesley present, not knowing the pain and anguish he was experiencing. Guilt overwhelmed me, and I felt sick inside.

I certainly didn't spend as much time with the boys as I did when I lived 100 miles away, and that was my shortcoming as a father. I didn't love or care for them any less, but I saw how he felt I had moved on. Before Wesley died, we moved back to Virginia, and I was again within 100 miles of where they lived. I know now that I did not visit them as much as I should have, but I thought we all had a good relationship.

After Wesley died, our world was turned upside down, and I took on roles I felt were necessary to get through it. This resulted in me shutting down my emotions so I



PHOTOS: JON GANUES



# Reconciliation

Surviving Father of A1C Jon Wesley Ganues Jr., U.S. Air Force



RaShawn's unleashing on me was open, honest, and, at the same time, inspiring. It was in no way disrespectful, but it was direct. He had become the man that I had hoped he would, even with me as a not-so-great example. It was weird feeling proud of him while he outlined my shortcomings, but I felt pride listening to this young man articulate himself.

I sat there and took it all in, reflecting on the past years, humbled. I couldn't and didn't try to dispute what RaShawn told me, it was his truth. We were emotional throughout this, each allowing tears to flow as needed. I responded to him after he finished, starting off by acknowledging how he felt. I made sincere apologies for the issues he raised and my role in all of them. It is not always easy to admit when you are wrong or have wronged someone, but I felt a sense of relief and peace responding to him, taking responsibility for my role. I had very few things to bring up, except asking why he didn't call me out on some of the things earlier in our relationship. It was a "had I known" moment for me, but also an "I should have known" moment.

could "take care" of things. Although I did eventually let my emotions out so I could grieve, my focus was not necessarily on the things that really mattered. RaShawn mattered, and I lost sight of his emotional and fatherly needs. I was focused on who I lost and not who I had.

The elephant in the room vanished very quickly, and I believe we both felt we were at a place where we could move forward in our relationship. This was extremely difficult, but we both needed that time in that cabin to regrow our relationship.

## STEPPING OUT ONTO A NEW PATH

As RaShawn and I stepped out of that cabin, we started on a new path. Our reconciliation in that cabin was scary, amazing, uplifting, and life-changing for us. Today, we communicate at least five times a week, and I am grateful we took the time in that cabin to work things out. He is an amazing father to his son, and I am proud of how he is setting examples for him to follow. I have been taking notes.

Recognizing how each person is affected and having frank conversations early on can go a long way in heading off relationship issues, some of which can tear those relationships apart.



The TAPS Men's Program gives men grieving the loss of a military or veteran service member space to heal their way through retreats — like the one Jon attended, meetings at TAPS seminars, and recurring Online Group meetings. Scan the QR code to learn more.

[taps.org/men](https://taps.org/men)



# The Power of Outdoor Play

SPEND TIME OUTSIDE TO BALANCE SCREEN TIME

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

Raising children today comes with the added challenge of technology — in the form of television, computers, tablets, and phones — competing for their attention. These devices offer 24/7 access to social media, games, movies, and other forms of entertainment. While technology has improved our lives in many ways, research shows that too much screen time can harm children's well-being. This research specifically indicates that video games, social media, and other technologies are addictive and are associated with depression, anxiety, and aggression in children.

It is important to balance technology use — or screen time, as it's often called — with activities that are proven to have a positive effect on children's overall health and well-being. One of the most accessible ways to

do this is to carve out time for our children to play outdoors.

## Physical Health

Outdoor play often requires physical movement, which helps our children build and maintain healthy muscle strength. Physical activity can also result in a healthier body mass index (BMI), which, in turn, impacts the health of our heart, lungs, and other important internal functions. But the benefits don't stop there, research also indicates that sunlight and nature support positive hormone production, leading to positive physical health. Limiting screen time and scheduling outdoor playtime can help to balance out some of the potential negative impacts of too much screen time.





# NO MATTER OUR CIRCUMSTANCES, BEING OUTDOORS — IN WHATEVER WAY WE CAN — WILL POSITIVELY IMPACT OUR CHILDREN'S WELL-BEING

## Mental and Emotional Well-Being

Spending time outside doesn't just impact our children's physical health. Research tells us that being outdoors also promotes healthy mental and emotional regulation. While we may not fully understand what exactly it is about being outdoors that is good for our children's mental and emotional well-being, studies show that children who spend time outdoors are happier, less anxious, and more attentive to their surroundings. They also tend to do better in school. Other positive impacts of regular outdoor playtime include improved creativity and imagination, a better ability to regulate emotions, and a heightened sense of joy.

## Spiritual Formation

Being in nature, whether in your own backyard, at a nearby park, at the beach, or on a scenic trail — anything accessible to you, activates our children's sense of awe and calls them to contemplate the world and their place in it. This helps give our children a sense of connection; it helps them find meaning; and it helps them achieve personal growth.

All of these positive impacts on our children's perspectives about themselves, others, and the world around them can counter negative messages they might

be exposed to on social media and other outlets that contradict values that we, as parents and guardians, want to instill in our children.

## Positive Social Development

In many cases, when our children are outside, they are encountering other people. Although technology does keep our children connected with their friends through social media and video games, those connections cannot replace in-person interactions, using their imaginations, and inventing activities to do with friends and family outdoors — which all support positive social development in our children. Research tells us that children who play outdoors feel more positive about their relationships with others and learn social cues that teach them how to interact with people of all ages.

Our access to the outdoors might be limited based on where we live, the weather, or other factors outside of our control. No matter our circumstances, being outdoors — in whatever way we can — will positively impact our children's well-being. As we move into the summer season and the weather invites us to be outdoors, make plans to take advantage of all the benefits the outdoors can offer.



**TAPS YOUTH PROGRAMS** can support you and your children through grief with age-appropriate activities — including plenty of outdoor activities at Good Grief Camps and Family Camps. Check out all the ways our team can support your family.

[taps.org/youthprograms](https://taps.org/youthprograms)





TAPS.ORG/PROGRAMS-SERVICES

For the Loved Ones of Those Who Served and Died



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.



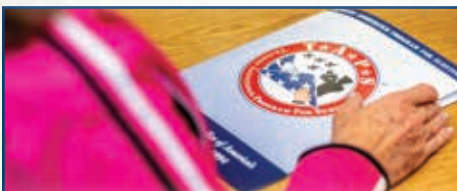
### PEER-BASED EMOTIONAL SUPPORT • TAPS.ORG/PEERMENTORS

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.



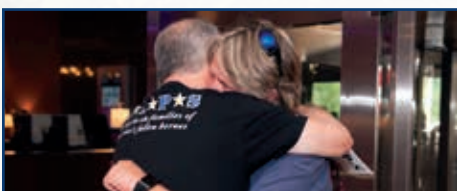
### CASEWORK ASSISTANCE • TAPS.ORG/CASEWORK

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 postsecondary 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.

PHOTOS: TAPS ARCHIVES; ISTOCKPHOTO.COM/GOLIBO/SJI PRODUCTIONS/INSIDE CREATIVE HOUSE; MIKE NOWAK/LOS ANGELES CHARGERS



## 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.







# Pets and Grief

## Can Our Animals Help Us Heal After Loss?

Stephanie Frogge, MTS ★ TAPS Staff

When the TAPS Helpline staff has a chance to connect every few days, we share information and updates, and we check in with each other — how are you, how is the week going, how is your family? And we know that family most definitely includes Niki's 40-pound bulldog mutt who thinks she's a lap dog, Maggie; my own Luna Cat, who is only sociable when I'm on Zoom or trying to work on my computer; and Kari's snakes, who sometimes worry us when they refuse to eat for several weeks.

Conversation about our own special pets invariably gives rise to touching stories TAPS survivors have shared about their love for their dogs, cats, horses, reptiles, hamsters, pot-bellied pigs, or other critters they've welcomed into their hearts and homes. Given that 66 percent of American households have a pet — dogs being the most common — it's no surprise that so many honorary members of the TAPS Family are of the four-legged variety. An undeniable standout theme is how our pets aid in coping and healing following the death of a loved one.

### Connection and Companionship

When Barbara Block lost her husband, LTC Matthew Hennick, to suicide, their dog, Sophie, became a grounding point when everything else was chaotic and terrifying.

Barbara shares:

"Sophie actually came to us through a program Matt was involved with at the correctional high school where he taught. Project Pooch helped troubled boys connect with and train dogs. If it hadn't been for Sophie, I'm not sure what I would have done after Matt died. I was in an absolute fog of confusion and grief, and she was what kept me from just getting into a car and driving to who knows where. I had to take care of her, take her for walks, and make sure I had food in the house. Friends would text me in the evening to check on me, but also to make sure I'd taken care of Sophie."

Science has found a number of health benefits connected with pet ownership. Pets — especially dogs — increase the opportunities we have to exercise, get outside, and socialize with other people. Regular walking or playing with pets can decrease blood pressure, cholesterol levels, and triglyceride levels. Pets can help manage loneliness, anxiety, and depression by giving us companionship. Studies show that pets can even decrease symptoms of PTSD.

A few years after Ralph Toland's son, Ralph Toland III, was killed in a motorcycle accident while in the Navy, Ralph saw a pit bull terrier featured on a local animal shelter's website. The dog came in as a stray, and the shelter named it Ralph!

"It was meant to be," Ralph recalls, "I'd had 'pitties' before, and I love rescue dogs. Ralphie and I have only been apart one night in the five years I've had him. Early on, Ralphie kept me from just sitting around thinking about my loss."

For many members of the TAPS Family,  
pets serve as important connections to the past...





...pets not only react to the absence of a beloved human but are impacted by the sadness of those around them.”

He’s someone to come home to and, when I travel, he goes with me — even to TAPS events.”

### Physical Health Impacts

Studies that looked specifically at pet ownership and cardiovascular disease found that animal companions may reduce the risk of heart disease, including heart attack and stroke. A 1992 report published in the *Medical Journal of Australia* found that — even when other health markers were the same, such as smoking, socioeconomic status, and body mass index (BMI) — pet owners had lower risk factors related to cardiovascular disease, including lower blood pressure, triglyceride levels, and cholesterol levels.

And, in the event of heart disease or a coronary event like a heart attack, a 2004 study by Gary Patronek and Larry Glickman with the Purdue University College of Veterinary Medicine found that pet ownership is associated with better survival rates when compared to people without pets.

Kari, from the TAPS Helpline, recalls:

“It’s sort of funny, but I actually quit smoking because of a cat. After my brother, SGT Donald Marine, took his life, a feral cat showed up at my mother’s house, and she started feeding it. About the time I was getting ready to move back to my hometown and move back in with Mom, the cat gave birth to a litter of kittens. Knowing my affinity for animals, Mom told me up front that I wasn’t getting a kitten — I wasn’t to ask or beg or wheedle. She wasn’t going to let me bring a cat into the house. Period. I said, ‘How about I quit smoking?’

“Without even pausing, she said, ‘Deal!’ So I got Moose and probably much happier lungs. Moose is very entertaining and helps ground me when I’m feeling sad.

He always wants attention, so I never feel alone, and his middle name is Donald, after my brother.”

### Psychological Benefits of Pets

Interacting with a loving creature has psychological benefits as well. For Gwen, being with her cats is, in her words, “more relaxing than anything else I’ve found since my husband died.” Not only is the physical experience of petting a purring cat therapeutic, but it reminds Gwen that she and her husband actually met as part of an animal rescue team:

“We fostered cats, dogs, goats, a few lizards, and — one time — a sloth that had been brought into the U.S. illegally.” Gwen shares, “Pet rescue was just a part of who we were as a couple. I’m not physically able to do it anymore, and I don’t think I’d want to now that Alan’s gone, but having my two cats is good for me and for remembering happy times.”

### Lasting Connection

For many members of the TAPS Family, pets serve as important connections to the past, whether they inherit a pet after a loved one passes or lean on the pet they shared with their loved one. Barbara Block’s dog, Sophie, was part of her life with Matt, and — unsurprisingly — grieved alongside her as she sought her “dad.” Survivors often report sensing that their pet is grieving too. Indeed, experts believe that pets not only react to the absence of a beloved human but are impacted by the sadness of those around them.







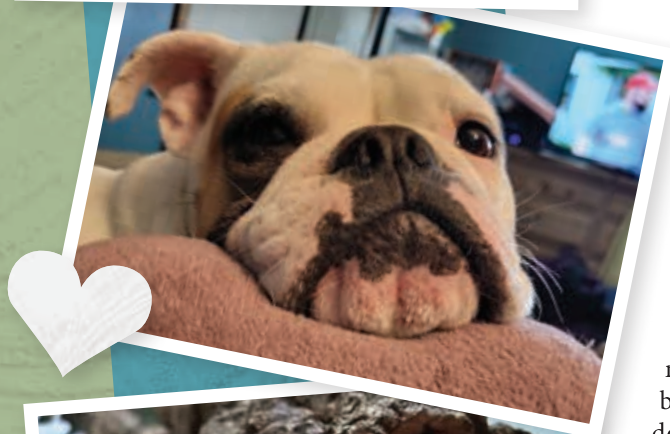
I wish Jaedyn and Jaedee had known each other, but... in a way I don't understand, they do.



Some researchers note that it's not enough to merely be around an animal to feel the positive impacts — the animal has to be perceived as a family member. A newspaper in Canada noted that an increasing number of obituaries were listing pets as surviving next-of-kin and conducted an analysis of its own records to examine this phenomenon.

my only option — about to take my own life when I felt a wet nudge under my elbow. I opened my eyes to find a big dog, bloody from head to toe. Thoughts of suicide went out of my head, and I led the dog to my backyard where I began washing her with the hose to see how she was injured.

"I have rescued animals all my adult life," Markala continues, "and I just went into autopilot to care for this one. I couldn't see any obvious injuries that would explain the blood, and she didn't seem especially stressed. In fact, as I washed her, she rolled onto her back with her paws in the air as though she wanted a belly rub. There on her chest was a big, white 'J.' I was so dumbfounded that, I called a friend and asked her to come over right away. My friend arrived, saw the J, and looked back and forth between the dog and me several times before saying, 'What the...'"



As recently as 1990, the paper found no obituaries listing pets. By the mid-2000s, there were a few, and by 2015, 15 percent of the paper's obituaries mentioned surviving pets. A 2015 study by Cindy Wilson that examined companion animals in obituaries noted that 2 percent of obituaries reviewed mentioned companion animals by name, suggested memorial donations to an animal charity, or both. While these numbers aren't overwhelming, they are further evidence of the significant roles our pets play in our lives.

"I know Jaedyn sent her to me — it was the only thing he could do that would save my life. The vet that I took her to that day couldn't find any injuries; I suspect Jaedyn just wanted to make absolutely sure she would get my attention, so he added a bucket of blood to freak me out. I named her Jaedee after my son; she's a shepherd-rottweiler-lab mix. Sometimes I wish Jaedyn and Jaedee had known each other, but then I realize that, in a way I don't understand, they do. I call where Jaedyn is buried 'his spot' in a large cemetery. The first time I took Jaedee, she made a beeline straight to Jaedyn's spot and laid down on his grave. She knew."

Markala Wretling's dog, Jaedee, is not only an emotional support companion, but she literally saved her life at her lowest point.

"After my son — my only child — Jaedyn, was killed in a car crash while on active duty for the Army, I was in a fog through the funeral and the memorial service at Fort Hood. When I got home, though, I realized I didn't know how I could live without him. I sat on my porch — head in my hands, thinking suicide was



### Past, Present, and Future

Markala's story reminds us that pets not only serve as connections to the person we lost and companions through deep grief, but also as a bridge to our futures after loss.





# TAPS MILITARY MENTORS ARE AT THE *Heart* OF TIME101 RECOGNITION

The April issue of *Time* magazine featured the publication's annual list of the 100 most influential people, and TAPS was proud to be included as this year's TIME101 honoree in partnership with Gillette and *Time's* award-winning branded content division Red Border. In case you missed the feature, TAPS Military Mentors were shown sharing special moments with their mentees at Good Grief Camp — most prominently featured was Military Mentor Tanner Haggerty teaching Andrew Ortiz, the surviving son of Marine Corps Sgt Miguel Ortiz, to shave during a 2023 TAPS shaving experience.

Military and Legacy Mentors aren't just at the heart of the TIME101 announcement, they always have been — and continue to be — at the heart of Good Grief Camp, where they honor the fallen by supporting young military and veteran survivors and being a lasting connection to their military heritage. The shaving experience is a TAPS tradition that lets Military Mentors step in and teach surviving teen boys to shave. It's a seemingly small step into manhood, but the impact, according to Military Mentor Mark Brickell, is lasting.

Mark learned the art of shaving from his dad as a young teen, and he recalls his dad telling him about learning to shave from his father. It's a rite of passage shared between father and son through generations.

"What I remember real clearly," Mark shares, "was my father standing behind me, looking in the mirror...reaching around me to help show me how to shave. I could feel [his] scruff and smell...what a lot of people think is cheap, old aftershave, but — to me — the smell was my dad."

When Mark joined the Marine Corps years later, a clean shave was a requirement. He bypassed the knicks and cuts that many young Marines encountered thanks to the lesson from his dad and years of practice. During boot camp, he recalls his father's scent bringing him a sense of peace in the middle of chaos each morning when he shaved.

"It's something that you don't learn from everybody," Mark points out. "Neighbors don't come over and teach you how to shave. It's your dad who teaches you how to shave."

Sadly, the teen boys learning to shave with TAPS at the shaving experience don't have their dads there to look them in the mirror and guide them through their first shave. But, thanks to our compassionate Military Mentors, like Mark, and Gillette's support, these young men will still have a gentle hand guiding them through each stroke of the razor. This rite of passage, though different, will be memorable. They will always recall the scent of their mentor's aftershave; it will bring them peace in the



middle of life's challenges. As they, one day, pass on what they know to their own sons, they'll experience the pride of watching a young man grow up in the mirror before them. They will wish they could've shared that with their dads, but their hearts will swell with gratitude for the heroes who stepped in and made sure they did not face this milestone alone.

*TAPS is grateful for TIME100's recognition of our critical mission and Gillette's dedication to the TAPS Military and Legacy Mentor program, which ensures bereaved military children have enduring support as they grow.*



# UPCOMING



# EVENTS

We hope to see you at one of our remaining 2024 events. Each time we gather together is an opportunity to honor your hero and find healing. Check out the events currently open on our calendar, and be sure to check [TAPS.org/events](https://TAPS.org/events) often — events are added throughout the year.

## JULY 26-28

WESTERN REGIONAL  
MILITARY SURVIVOR SEMINAR  
AND GOOD GRIEF CAMP  
*Scottsdale, Arizona*

## OCTOBER 4-6

SOUTHERN REGIONAL  
MILITARY SURVIVOR SEMINAR  
AND GOOD GRIEF CAMP  
*San Antonio, Texas*

## AUGUST 23-25

NORTHEAST REGIONAL  
MILITARY SURVIVOR SEMINAR  
AND GOOD GRIEF CAMP  
*Buffalo, New York*

## OCTOBER 24-27

CALIFORNIA  
FAMILY CAMP  
*Portola, California*

## SEPTEMBER 23-26

TAPS ANNUAL SURVIVOR  
ADVOCACY WEEK  
*Washington, D.C.*

## NOVEMBER 15-17

SOUTHEAST REGIONAL  
MILITARY SURVIVOR SEMINAR  
AND GOOD GRIEF CAMP  
*Destin, Florida*

Scan the QR code to find and register for any of our upcoming events. Be sure to check back often for updates. New events are added throughout the year.



[TAPS.org/events](https://TAPS.org/events)

TAPS Care Groups bring the comfort of TAPS to your local community with meetings happening all throughout the year. Find a group near you by scanning the QR code.



[TAPS.org/caregroups](https://TAPS.org/caregroups)



PHOTOS: TAPS ARCHIVES



# Memories Made

## at the 30th Annual National Military Survivor Seminar and Good Grief Camp

TAPS was proud to spend Memorial Day weekend in the heart of our nation, surrounded by love, legacy, and support. Our hearts are full of gratitude for the moments that we shared, the heroes who were honored, and the healing that was found among peers navigating the same path. The compassion and support from speakers, military and government leaders in attendance, and familiar faces from the sports and entertainment industries represented the grateful nation standing behind us all. From first-time attendees to 30-year traditions, it was a weekend to remember.

### Remember the Love



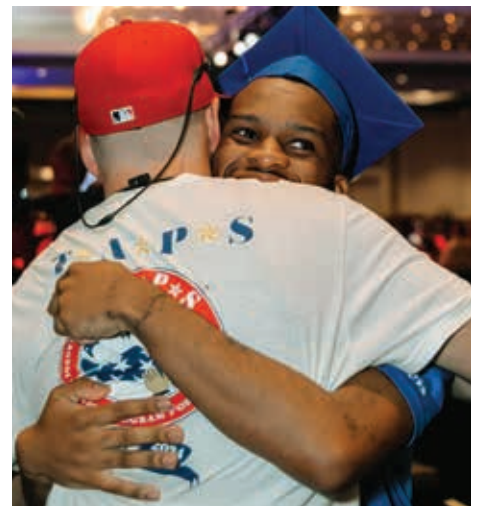
The bonds forged at the national seminar help ease the pain of the grief journey. Clockwise from top left: A TAPS survivor places a heartfelt message on her hero's photo on the TAPS Hero Wall. TAPS Founder and President Bonnie Carroll is joined by senior military leaders in the Grand Ballroom. Good Grief Camp mentors and campers enjoy a stroll together.



# Celebrate the Life



## *TAPS — This is where Legacies Live*



First row, left to right: Surviving children enjoyed an NBA clinic at the Good Grief Camp Jamboree at Joint Base Myer-Henderson Hall. Good Grief Campers close out the jamboree with an evening concert. Second row: Survivors start their morning with a nature walk. Young surviving children take in the view from the child care room. A surviving teen boy learns to shave in the TAPS Shaving Experience alongside a TAPS Military Mentor. Third row: Children bond and play together during Good Grief Camp. A TAPS Good Grief Camp graduate hugs a mentor after crossing the stage.

PHOTOS: TAPS ARCHIVES



# Share the Journey



## #HonorThem



First row: Surviving parents share a moment with ADM Grady, Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the Grand Banquet. Surviving teens and Military Mentors present the TAPS Honor Wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier on Memorial Day. Second Row: Survivors show off their lifetime park passes courtesy of the National Park Service. Actor Robert Patrick spends time with TAPS survivors. Third row: Surviving children visit their father in Arlington National Cemetery. Bonnie Carroll shares a moment with seminar attendees. Survivors march in the National Memorial Day Parade.



# Surviving Suicide Loss

## ONE MOTHER'S STORY

Ava Henrickson ★ Surviving Mother of SSGT Adam Henrickson, U.S. Army

### THE NIGHT THAT LIFE CHANGED

It was September 10, 2020. The pandemic was still affecting everyday life across the globe. I was lying in bed, half-asleep, when I thought I heard noises downstairs — like someone was knocking at the door. It was close to midnight, so I thought I must've been imagining it. I tuned it out, chalking it up to the neighbors being noisy. Shortly after I put it out of my mind, my phone lit up as it buzzed across the bedside table. It was my brother-in-law. Why was he calling me so late? I debated answering in my groggy state of mind — it was so late, I was so sleepy.

But, I was also so curious. So, after a few rings, I did answer it — rather cheerfully for that time of night. His voice was low and soothing as he told me over and over that I needed to go downstairs and answer the door. At that point, I was completely confused. How in the world did Dane

know that there was someone at my door? My tired, yet inquisitive mind insisted on knowing how he knew someone was knocking and why I needed to answer the door. It's safe to say that I was not, at that point, at all grasping the severity of the situation. I even entertained the thought that he had — with my sister's help — orchestrated some grand surprise for me on the other side of the door, and this unusual phone call was the last bit of the plan. Still confused and the slightest bit hopeful, I slowly climbed out of bed and groggily made my way down the stairs with the phone still pressed to my ear. Dane stayed on the line with me, softly coaxing me with each step, and repeating the same answer to all of my questions: "Just go answer the door."

Arriving at the door, I peered through the peephole, but the dark night made it nearly impossible to make out who was standing at my front door with any certainty. With my mind still reeling, I

opened the door, and I clearly saw two men in Army dress. In that moment, the swirling questions and speculation rolled to a stop. That's when it finally hit me. My life is about to change. I knew there was only one reason these men would be at my door in the middle of the night.

"Are you Ava Henrickson?" one of them asked. I nodded as swear words snuck past my lips.

The heartbreaking moments that followed were uneasy and blurry. I remember clumsily making the walk from the door to my couch — a familiar walk I'd done thousands of times, but suddenly my feet were lost — as I ushered the two men inside. The older of the two men handled introductions for them both. He was a chaplain, and the younger man with him was a notification officer. I remember looking at the young notification officer and being sure he would rather be anywhere else but in my



PHOTOS: AVA HENRICKSON



# *That's when it finally hit me. My life is about to change.*

living room as the chaplain gently told me that Adam, my precious son, died.

My mind struggled to absorb that word. And somewhere between the chaplain sharing in careful detail that Adam died by suicide and the notification officer beginning to speak, “The Secretary of the Army regrets...” this mother’s heart broke and a dense mental fog rolled in.

The chaplain asked if I’d like my sister to come in just as she walked through the door. Telling her what I’d just learned about Adam added an uncomfortable realness to it. I reached for her and fell into her arms as we both digested the news through tears.

I can’t recall how long I stayed there in my sister’s arms, but I know that the chaplain and notification officer eventually left. A quiet filled the living room once they were gone. I sat quietly in the company of my sister, Angie, and

brother-in-law, Dane, who was also now in my living room. There were questions swirling behind our eyes, but we just sat and stared, none of us speaking or really processing yet what we’d just heard.

The silence was only broken when I acknowledged the knot in my stomach alerting me that I had to tell my daughter, Alissa. As I pieced the words together, and Alissa used every word to make meaning out of what I was saying, tears flowed on both ends of the line.

## THE DAYS THAT FOLLOWED

In the days after the notification, I felt so out of control. The absolute worst thing that could happen had happened. We had so little information in those early days, but what we did know, my brain couldn’t possibly process through the fog and the shock. Despite the all-encompassing questions dancing in my

head, all I truly wanted was to hold my sweet son in my arms again and never let go.

The blurry day after the notification, Angie and Dane left — likely to get some sleep. My own eyes eventually stopped fighting sleep, and I managed to rest for a little while. At some point on day two, my best friend rushed to be by my side. We talked about the next steps, and she helped me fill the quiet as I anxiously waited for the phone to ring. When the ring finally chimed out, it was around 3 p.m. On the other end of the line was Colorado National Guardsman SGT Ryan Teetering on behalf of the U.S. Army. He would be my casualty assistance officer, and his voice would become so familiar to me in the days that followed. He listened carefully to all of my questions, and promised only what he could — to try to have some answers for us at the arranged meeting the following morning. What I wanted most — to know where my son was and hold him again





*Today I am an advocate for mental health and suicide awareness and strive to honor Adam's memory every day as I move forward in my grief journey.*

— he couldn't promise. At the time of his death, Adam was stationed in Germany — a place he dreamed of exploring, but it was so far from home, so far from me.

The days that followed ran together, but I recall clearly that I was rarely alone. Friends and family managed visitors and food deliveries. I met with my casualty assistance officer often, and I was surrounded by my support system every time — they diligently took notes and offered questions I couldn't think of.

SGT Teeter did his best to get answers for us, but the days stretched on. Each day, I awoke with the hope that I would finally get the answers to the when, where, how, and why questions. I knew that getting the details of what happened would be very difficult to hear, but I needed to know everything. The problem was — as I know now — I'd never know everything.

I'd never be able to know what Adam was thinking.

When the answers I sought finally came, and we were able to connect with the special agent in charge in Germany across the eight-hour time difference between Germany and Denver, it was painful, just as I knew it would be.

#### FOUR YEARS LATER

My first thought as I opened the door the night of the notification was right. My life did change right then and there. I lost my precious son and I became a surviving mother.

Being a surviving mother in those first days looks a lot different than it does now, nearly four years later. Today, in honor of Adam, I advocate for mental health and suicide awareness. I share my story and

Adam's story in hopes that it will reach someone who desperately needs to hear it. Along my grief journey, I participated in a documentary on grief. Today, I regularly attend grief groups to continue nurturing my grief. Healing is a process, and I actively participate in mine. In Adam's memory, I strive every day to live a life that honors his too-short life. The team of support that rallied around me the night my life changed and the days that followed are still with me today. I feel very fortunate to have had all these people beside me each step of the way.

#### MY SON

Adam was a skilled mechanic, photographer, writer, artist, lover of cats, and an all-around genuine, nice guy. He is remembered for his sensitive nature and prankster sense of humor, and he is missed more than words can say.



At TAPS, we understand the complex emotions, questions, and issues that accompany suicide grief. If you have lost a military or veteran service member to suicide, you are not alone, and you have a safe place with TAPS. Begin by reading the 10 things we know to be true about suicide loss on the following page and scan the QR code to reach resources carefully created for suicide-loss survivors.

[taps.org/suicide](https://taps.org/suicide)



# 10 Things We Know

## TO BE TRUE ABOUT SURVIVING SUICIDE LOSS

**You are not alone.** Grief can feel isolating, but you don't have to walk this journey alone. We've been down the road you're traveling, and we're here for you.

**You will not always feel this much pain.** As time passes, the hurt you feel now will change. We know from experience that your emotional pain will subside and soften with time. It won't always feel like it does right now.

**Most people who die by suicide do not want to die; they want their pain to end.** Whatever pain brought our loved ones to end their lives, it inhibited them from thinking clearly and from fully comprehending the heartbreak their suicides would cause.

**It's not your fault.** Suicide is rarely the result of just one person, conversation, or event. It usually involves multiple

complex factors that culminate in a "perfect storm."

**You cannot prevent what you cannot predict.** There was no way you could have known it would happen that very day, at that precise moment. You cannot control the thoughts and actions of others.

**Eventually, the questions will cease to be so all-encompassing.**

Why? What if? Most of us who have experienced suicide loss wrestle with these and other questions for a long time. This is normal. It helps us to learn enough to suffice — to process our thoughts so that we can eventually find peace.

**What you tell yourself matters.**

How you talk to yourself about what happened can shape the experience of your grief journey. Trust what you know

about your loved one, and choose to tell yourself the story that best helps you heal.

**Suicide is not a reflection of love.**

People who die by suicide may have believed they were a burden to the people they loved. They thought that their families would be better off without them. While we know this to be untrue, our loved ones could not see clearly through the fog of their emotional pain.

**How you cope with this is up to you.**

You didn't choose for this to happen to you, but you do get to decide how to respond to it. You have a say in how you heal.

**Love never ends.**

When your loved one died, the love you shared didn't just stop. Your relationship continues. Keep the positive memories alive in all that you do.

If you are in need of immediate suicide postvention support, please contact the 24/7 TAPS National Military Survivor Helpline at **800-959-TAPS (8277)**.

If you are in crisis, **Dial 988** to reach the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. Service members, veterans, or someone concerned about one can dial 988, then press 1 to reach the Veterans Crisis Line.



# FACING IT ALL

A WINDING ROAD

April Bowden ★ Surviving Spouse of U.S. Army SSG Joshua Bowden

Kristi Stolzenberg ★ Editor, *TAPS Magazine*

“I’m an open book,” Gold Star Spouse April Bowden shares during our introductory phone call. “Truth opens the doors to healing.” April speaks about her life, her loss, and her purpose with a realness, a rawness that both takes you by surprise and is incredibly relatable once her contagious sense of self-awareness forces us to take a look at ourselves and confront the things we carry along with our grief.

## ROOTED PAIN

April openly admits she was a “hurt human” long before her husband, U.S. Army SSG Josh Bowden, died in combat on Aug. 31, 2013. “I have always struggled with mental health,” she shared in a February interview with *Bold Journey*. “I come from a long line of addiction [and] sexual abuse.” April describes where she came from as a “broken home” with a father who struggled with addiction and popped in and out of her life until she was 11, and a mother who did the best she could with the situation she was handed.

In April’s words, “Outside of being medicated at a young age for ADHD, I never really got help. My issues were ignored. I was never really right.” She “coped” by numbing her young nervous system, including exposure to substance use as early as 11 and self-harm. The world moved fiercely forward, but, most days, April felt like she was treading water.

## IN THE ARMY

In what April calls a “window of peace” in her life, she met a soldier in Huntsville, AL. He was steady, preppy, and a contrast to April in many ways, but they both loved heavy metal, and that was the only seed they needed to grow their relationship. Even after transferring to Eglin Air Force Base to continue his training, Josh visited April every weekend.

They married in June of 2007, when April was 19 and Josh was 20, and quickly followed the Army’s orders to Alaska. “We were both excited about getting away together,” April told the *Redstone Rocket* in a 2014 article.

“We were close in Alabama...but we got closer in Alaska. The only people we had were each other, so it made us better together.”

Not long after arriving in Alaska, April found out she was pregnant, and their son was born in June 2008 — ahead of Josh’s first deployment to Afghanistan. April fondly recalls the support system she found in Alaska during that deployment. Living on post, she spent much of her time with her fellow Army wives.

When Josh returned from war, he brought depression and PTSD with him. At that time, the only thing that helped him was being held, so she cared for him and their baby at the same time. It wasn’t long after his return that April’s dormant trust and self-image issues began to reemerge, and Josh started shutting her out.

They made the difficult decision to separate in 2011, but she and Josh never gave up



PHOTOS: U.S. ARMY, APRIL BOWDEN, AND PEXELS - DEVA DARSHAN

# TOWARD HEALING

**WORKING ON ONE ASPECT OF HER LIFE AT A TIME, SHE SLOWLY PULLED HERSELF UP. IT WAS — AND CONTINUES TO BE — AN EVOLVING, INTENTIONAL PROCESS THAT BEGAN WHEN SHE LET FAITH IN AND TURNED AWAY FROM NUMBING HER PAIN WITH SUBSTANCES.**

on each other. They remained best friends, talked often, saw each other whenever possible, and took turns refusing to sign the divorce papers — one of them always finding a reason not to go through with it.

## LOSING THE ARMY, THEN JOSH

Even before Josh's death, April began losing pieces of her life with him. Leaving the supportive Army network when they separated and returning to civilian life was extremely difficult. She was still his wife, but their lives moved forward in different directions.

When Josh, at 28 years old and on his second deployment, was killed in a small-arms fire while on patrol in Ghazni, Afghanistan, in 2013, April completely and abruptly lost the man she'd clung to for so many years. "Josh was my normalcy," she admits, "after he died, I didn't know how to function."

His sudden and traumatic death awakened old, destructive coping strategies that

she never faced, and she found herself in a yearslong spiral toward rock bottom.

As she told *Bold Journey*, despite completely and totally losing Josh the minute he died, "It took God a really long time to take Josh out of my identity...I was really sick. It was like I died with him." She became obsessed with ghosts and anything bigger than herself that could make Josh's death and her grief make sense, but she confesses, "The substances I was using cut me off from the answers I sought." At her lowest point in 2020, April admits she had "nowhere to look other than in the mirror. In that mirror, there was a monster."

## WILLING TO HEAL

Like most grieving people, April didn't face her grief in a vacuum. She faced it already fatigued from the weight of past traumas, grudges, fears, lies, addictions, insecurities, and regrets she'd carried for so many years. To find healing from her grief, she had to face it all with brutal honesty.

Working on one aspect of her life at a time, she slowly pulled herself up. It was — and

continues to be — an evolving, intentional process that began when she let faith in and turned away from numbing her pain with substances. "Today, I'm no longer that abused little girl, but she still lives within me, and I love her every day," April shared with *Bold Journey*. "I try to build her a new house with love, laughter and free will, adventure, and safety — something she never had." Ultimately, she hopes her story will help others navigate their own grief and trauma.

We all carry heavy things along with our grief that can complicate our journeys toward healing. Numbing or ignoring the pain will always keep inner peace or deep meaning just out of reach. April's story reminds us that life won't be perfect — that we aren't perfect. We'll face storms, but we don't have to fear them if our foundations and faith are strong and we draw strength from our pasts as we take one willing step after another into our futures.



The TAPS Institute for Hope and Healing® connects you with grief and mental health experts through a robust collection of free online workshops that help you understand your grief and choose healthy coping strategies. View upcoming courses or choose a webinar from our archives to get started at [taps.org/institute](https://taps.org/institute).



# I Never Said

# GOODBYE

Matt Davison ★ U.S. Air Force Veteran



We weren't very close  
in the traditional sense  
not back-slapping buddies,  
nor kindred spirits.  
We would never have met  
on the street  
we'd have gone our separate ways  
oblivious to one another.

We could never agree  
on politics, religion, morals —  
he was the Rock of Gibraltar  
I was a rolling stone.

He was of another time  
when people still believed  
in the dream  
and fought to protect it.

He held but one job,  
loved but one woman  
and raised two kids  
in a kaleidoscope society.

His European parents whipped  
him into line early on;  
he never had the luxury  
of being a rebel.

For 70 years,  
he suppressed a call to the sea —  
it filled his senses  
at the first hint of spring.  
I watched him hunt his own food,  
fight his own fights,  
look any man in the eye,  
and ask for nothing.

He wouldn't cater to your dreams  
try to buy you off  
lie to you or  
give you a free ride.

He was tough, but he was fair  
he was John Wayne  
before there ever was a  
John Wayne.

He disapproved  
of my aimless wanderings,  
but he'd be waiting for me  
when my bus rolled in.

He never saw me act,  
recite my poetry,  
or attended my plays,  
but he'd slip me a few bucks from  
time to time.

He'd just lost his lady  
and his health was failing,  
but he came all the way to New York  
to attend our wedding.

That was just it  
he was there,  
always there,  
you could depend upon it.

I lost him a year ago  
three thousand miles ago  
hospitalized one day,  
gone the next.

He didn't get to see how tall  
his grandson got  
or hear me say "I love you"  
or even say goodbye.

I think of him often  
the way he'd lose himself  
in yesterdays  
and smile at a secret.

The way he'd shake your hand  
you'd feel that this man  
was granite —  
a man of his word.

Whatever good I have in me  
I got it from this man,  
and his lady.

*We're so close, now that he's gone.*

OF COURSE I CRY FOR YOU WHEN I AM LOW. BUT, IT IS ALSO IN MY  
HAPPIEST TIMES WHEN I PAUSE AND WANT TO SHARE THEM WITH YOU.  
AND THEN, I THINK IT WAS PROBABLY YOU WHO PUT THEM THERE.

— SARA RIAN







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

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**TAPS Salutes the 2024 Graduates**

Take TAPS with you as you begin a new chapter and work toward your goals. Plug into our Young Adults Program, support fellow survivors as a mentor, and stay connected to TAPS Education Support Services at any stage in your education. TAPS' support grows with you, and we will support you each step of the way.



» [taps.org/youngadults](https://taps.org/youngadults)



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