

Honoring a Gold Star Family



It's been seven years since Dale and Claudia Lembke became a Gold Star Family after losing their son, Marine Corporal Matthew Lembke, from wounds suffered while on patrol in Afghanistan. I

thought it important to introduce Tualatin to its own Gold Star Family so they could understand that when a son or daughter makes the ultimate sacrifice, the surviving family shares deeply in that sacrifice. I was concerned about adding to their grief by asking these questions, but as always, they were incredibly gracious and open about it. Thank you, Dale and Claudia, for allowing me to share your story.

Jonathan Crane
Past Publisher
jon@integritystaffingusa.com

SINCE MATTHEW'S DEATH IN 2009, HOW HAVE THE TWO OF YOU BEEN ABLE TO BALANCE THE NEED TO MOVE FORWARD WHILE STILL HONORING MATTHEW?

It is a constant struggle to figure out how to keep moving forward since Matt's death, while still honoring him. We have to move forward; you can't stay in that place! All the things we've done in his memory help us to focus on something positive, such as the Regatta Run and the scholarship named after him. We always try to keep in mind what Matt would want us to do. We're not sure what he would think of the run or the scholarship but we do think he would appreciate the community involvement and the spirit of paying it forward.

HOW HAS THE REGATTA RUN, WHICH HONORS MATTHEW AS WELL AS KEEPS HIS LEGACY ALIVE WITH THE TUALATIN COMMUNITY, SERVED TO HELP HEAL WOUNDS WHILE STAYING CONNECTED TO HIS AND YOUR FRIENDS AND FAMILY?

The run has been very instrumental in helping us cope with our loss. Seeing his hometown friends and his friends from the Marine Corp, along with other family and friends who show up for the run each year has been such a gift to us. Beyond those who know us or have known Matt are people from the community who have heard Matt's story and want to come out and lend their support. It's incredible and we are so pleased with the increased turn out each year. Some of his friends and our family members travel a great distance to be here for the run and we just can't thank them enough for that.



Corporal Matthew Lembke in Ramadi, Iraq, 2008.

SINCE TUALATIN IS SUCH A SMALL TOWN, MATTHEW'S DEATH SEEMED TO BE NOTICED AND FELT BY EVERYONE. NEWS SPREAD LIKE WILDFIRE AND THE COMMUNITY SEEMED TO FEEL A DEEP SENSE OF COLLECTIVE LOSS. DID YOU FEEL THE COMMUNITY'S LOVE? IF SO, HOW DID THAT EFFECT YOUR RECOVERY?

Within hours of us learning that Matt had been injured, his friends started reaching out to us. A few showed up at our house that day and helped get the word out to his large circle of friends. One friend started a FaceBook page to help keep everyone up on Matt's status, and many of our friends and family joined FaceBook for the first time in order to stay informed. The three of us (Dale, Claudia & Carolyn) were flown first to Landstuhl, Germany to be with Matt, then to Bethesda, Maryland when Matt was transferred. Meanwhile, a couple of his high school buddies contacted the Oregonian to get Matt's story published in the paper. The ban on news coverage of military deaths had recently been lifted, and it seemed like a lot of people were surprised by the amount of coverage Matt's story got in the local media. When we returned from Bethesda after

Matt's death, we felt an outpouring of support from the Tualatin community and beyond. We received stacks of cards and letters of condolences for several weeks. Neighbors, friends, and even some local folks we didn't know showed up at our doorstep with flowers or food. A couple of Tualatin police officers came by the house to fill us in on what to expect when Matt would be transported from the Hillsboro airport to the funeral home with police escort. The Patriot Guard had contacted us to ask if they could assist with the transport from Hillsboro and again on the day of the funeral. The local police encouraged us to take full advantage of the Patriot Guard's help because sometimes military funerals can become a draw for war protesters. Our faith community at St. Cyril's Catholic Church in Wilsonville and Resurrection Catholic Church in Tualatin worked together to plan a beautiful service for Matt. That day was a blur to us but we were told there were well over 800 in attendance.



TO RECOGNIZE THE SACRIFICE MADE BY MATTHEW AND YOUR ENTIRE FAMILY, THE VFW HALL WAS NAMED IN HIS HONOR, THE REGATTA RUN WAS ESTABLISHED, AND THE T&HS SCHOLARSHIP WAS CREATED. HIS # 70 FOOTBALL UNIFORM WAS EVEN RETIRED AT THE HIGH SCHOOL. ARE THESE CONSTANT REMINDERS HELPFUL OR DO THEY MAKE YOU SAD?

The various tributes to Matt are definitely bitter sweet for us but we never discourage anyone who wants to honor Matt's memory, and we try to be supportive to these events in any way we can. You are told that time heals all wounds but it really doesn't get much easier as time goes on, and we can still be reduced to tears at the mention of Matt's name. For me (Claudia), it was really hard attending the Senior Awards Night at the high school the first 2 or 3 years after the scholarship was established. It was hard for me to face so many happy, optimistic seniors ready to make their way in the world, as I sat there so full of unbearable grief. On the upside we have met some very deserving Tualatin High School seniors and have been able to participate in the scholarship selection process. Some of them have told us how Matt's story has affected them or shared how the scholarship money has helped them reach their college goals. Some students have

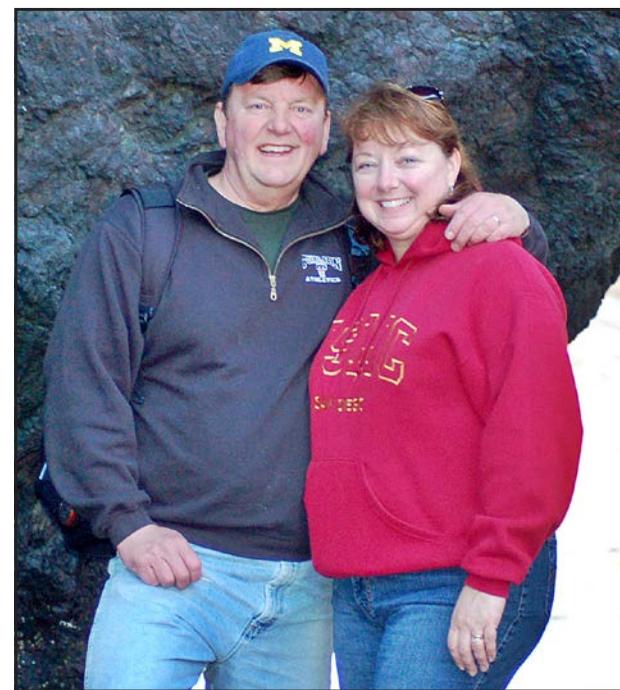
told us they've been inspired by the picture of Matt and his retired football jersey which are beautifully framed and hung just outside the weight room in the high school, where Matt spent many hours working out.

DALE, YOU'VE BEEN A STRONG ADVOCATE FOR VETERAN CAUSES IN THE YEARS SINCE MATT HAS PASSED (VFW MEN'S AUXILIARY, HONOR FLIGHTS). WHEN YOU TRAVELED TO WASHINGTON D.C. TO ASSIST WITH WWII VETS TO SEE THE MEMORIALS ERECTED IN THEIR HONOR, DID YOU FIND THAT PROCESS CATHARTIC AND IF SO, WHY?

I am a strong advocate for veterans. I see them in a very different light now. I was proud to be a founding member and was very involved in the Tualatin VFW Mens Auxiliary for six years. I think we worked hard and were able to accomplish many things for local veteran's causes and the community. It was very surreal for me that our sons name was on the building but I became very proud of that. I always tried very hard to downplay our name whenever talking with veterans there. I didn't want the focus to be on us and didn't want anyone to feel sorry for us either. That's not why I was there. I really enjoy working for and being with veterans. That's why I became a founding member of Honor Flights of Portland Oregon. It is extremely rewarding in many ways and it certainly keeps me connected to veterans. I think many vets have different and interesting perspectives on life. I don't always agree but we can almost always find some common ground. I've volunteered on three trips to Washington DC with WWII vets over the years and each one was very memorable in different ways. I've made great and lasting friendships with many vets and some even now still come to Matt's Run every October. They are our special honored guest.

DO YOU GET TOGETHER WITH OTHER GOLD STAR FAMILIES? IF SO, WHAT IS THAT LIKE?

We have gotten together with other Gold Star families in the area which has been very enlightening and helpful to us. Dave Troyer and his family reached out to us within weeks of Matt's death. His son Tyler,



Dale and Claudia Lembke.

from Albany, was also a Marine who was shot while on patrol in Iraq in 2005. Dave has been a catalyst for bringing other area Gold Star families together and is a huge supporter of veteran's causes. We have also met the parents of Keaton Coffey from Boring, the parents of Andrew Keller from Beaverton. It has been quite cathartic to talk with these folks. They really know pain and grief and loss of a loved one. We share a special bond of being in a "terrible club" that no one wants to be a member of – but it's not your choice. We always share love and laughter and cry a little too. When we get together we enjoy each others company and you can almost get the sense that we can finish each other's sentences when we are talking about our sons.

DOES BEING A GOLD STAR FAMILY EFFECT YOUR POLITICAL OUTLOOK? IF SO, HOW?

We don't feel that being a Gold Star family has had an effect on our political outlook. There are military families aligned with both of the major political parties, and there are government leaders from both parties that support military families and veteran's causes. I don't believe there has ever been a president that is responsible for your happiness or your outlook on life – that is completely up to you! When those vets are in combat they aren't thinking about winning the battle for whichever political party is currently in place. They fight for each other for the guy next to you. They protect and help each other. They are fighting for our way of life and this great country.



Dale assisting a few Oregon WWII Vets in Washington D.C. with Honor Flights program, 2013.