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MAKING STEPS COUNT

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By DONNA BOYLE SCHWARTZ

Personal tragedy sometimes can be a catalyst for public prowess, as the story of wear blue: run to remember makes clear. This national non-profit organization is dedicated to honoring the service and sacrifice of the American military through active remembrance, including an annual series of running/walking events.

wear blue: run to remember was founded in March 2010 following the redeployment of 5-2 Stryker Brigade Combat Team. While deployed to Afghanistan in support of Operation Enduring Freedom, the 1-17 Infantry Battalion, Buffalo, sustained significant combat losses and casualties. During that deployment, a small group

of 5-2 wives and battalion staff met weekly to run, creating a support network for one another during this challenging and heartbreaking deployment.

wear blue co-founder and executive director, Lisa Hallett, lost her husband, CPT John Hallett, when he and three other soldiers were killed while returning from a goodwill mission in southern Afghanistan. The Hallett children were just three years, one year, and just three weeks old when John was killed; he never met his youngest child. A lifelong runner, Lisa turned to running and community to navigate this incredibly difficult time and work through her grief and loss. When the brigade returned,

Lisa and fellow Army wife, Erin O'Connor, turned this small group into a nationwide organization that now helps thousands across the country heal from the devastating effects of the loss of a military loved one.

"My story speaks for my 'why' – but what continues to resonate, nearly 15 years after the death of my husband, is my continued 'why,'" she explains. "When John was killed, my children were so young that I was able to focus on my grief. Now, as all three of my children are in high school, they navigate the very real challenges of a life without their father. As we near the 15-year anniversary of John's passing and the 15th year of *wear blue*, the four of us need to know – need to witness – that we are still a nation that remembers our fallen. As life wonderfully demands that we move forward, that there are others who remember with us, and on some days, for us."

According to Hallett, the original *wear blue* runners wore blue Buffalo PT (physical training)



shirts when they were running together while their spouses were deployed. Blue shirts are now worn as a tribute to the 5-2 Stryker Brigade Combat Team.

"When an individual dons a *wear blue* shirt, they demonstrate their support of our service members, veterans, and their families, and their commitment to ensuring that our fallen service members will always be remembered," she points out. "Today, *wear blue* honors all members of the military who pass away while in service and has evolved into a powerful network of currently serving, veterans, military families, Gold Star and surviving families, and community members.

"*wear blue's* logo is the sole of a shoe with 41 stars for the 41 soldiers killed during 5-2's deployment to southern Afghanistan," she adds. "The tagline, 'For the fallen. For the fighting. For the families,' is embedded in the shoe print. The name of the organization is written in all lower case to represent that the mission – who we serve; who we honor; who we remember – is more important than the name."

The organization is supported by more than 2,500 volunteers across the nation, as well as through individual donors and partnerships with companies, foundations, and other non-profits, including USAA, Boeing, Amazon Military, and the Bob Woodruff Foundation, among others. To date, more than 2 million athletes have moved through the *wear blue* Mile; 60 military installations are served by *wear blue*

programming; 155 families of the fallen have completed their first endurance race through the Gold Star Race program; and 400 have served through the Gold Star Youth Mentorship Program.

Hallett herself continues to be an active participant in various military causes: Appointed by Secretary Denis McDonough, she currently serves on the Department of Veteran Affairs Family, Caregiver, and Survivor Advisory Committee. Appointed by President Barack Obama, she served on the American Battle Monument Commission from January 2017 to December 2018. She is a 2018 Presidential Leadership Scholar. She is a former member of the Survivor Advisory Working Group, advising the Chief of Staff of the Army on quality of life-issues and concerns affecting the military survivor community. She holds a Master of Education in Teaching from the University of Hawaii and a Bachelor of Arts in English Literature from the University of California, Santa Barbara. An endurance athlete, she has competed in dozens of ultra marathons and seven IRONMAN distance races, including the 2014 World Championships. Most recently, she completed the 2022 Leadville 100, a 100-mile footrace in the mountains of Colorado.

"*wear blue* uses wellness, community, and remembrance to support those impacted by military loss," Hallett remarks. "While less than 1% of our nation serves in the military, they raise their right hand to protect and defend the 99% of us... truly out of a love for and belief in the potential of our nation, *wear blue* is a place for all

of us – service members, veterans, survivors, our families and our patriotic supporters to remember, live inspired, and build meaningful community...all through wellness. Our community run/walks are open to all ages, abilities, and connections to military service and are always at no-cost to participate.

"The Tribute Mile is one of *wear blue*'s most iconic programs," she adds. "A one-mile stretch of a race course becomes lined with images of fallen heroes, each personally provided by a

friend or family member of the service member. Placed in chronological order by date of sacrifice, these images are followed by the local community holding American flags in honor of each of these men and women. As thousands of runners move through this Tribute *wear blue* Mile, quiet falls, and they move through a purposeful pause of remembrance into a celebration of life, country, and our charge to live in the aftermath of such sacrifices." The Tribute *wear blue* Mile will be fea-

tured at the July 2024 San Francisco Marathon, September 2024 Air Force Marathon, October 2024 Marine Corps Marathon, and the December 2024 Rock 'n' Roll San Antonio Marathon.

"With every step, *wear blue* creates a living memorial to the service and sacrifice of the American military," Hallett points out. "And on race day, our *wear blue* Mile allows all athletes to pay tribute to the service members who have paid the ultimate sacrifice. It is a reminder that freedom isn't free – it was bought and paid for by men and women in uniform." 





Memorial Day Mission

This Memorial Day, wear blue: run to remember is inviting military families and supporters all across the U.S. to help create the largest living memorial by honoring more than 65,000 service members who have given their lives since the Vietnam War.

"Together, we can ensure the enduring remembrance of our fallen service members, as we learn their stories, speak their names, and honor their legacies," explains wear blue co-founder and executive director, Lisa Hallett. "It's simple to join: visit the wear blue: run to remember website at <http://www.wearbluerun-toremember.org> to receive the name and story of a fallen service member, and, on Memorial Day, take purposeful steps in his/her honor. Participants may dedicate their steps to a fallen hero they personally know.

"wear blue hosts dozens of community runs/walks around the world on Memorial Day in support of these heroes, and at no cost to participate," she continues. "Before these fallen heroes died, they lived. This Memorial Day, we speak their names, learn their stories, and commit to live inspired by their courage, dedication, and love of country. This incredible effort is made possible by a gener-

ous partnership with the Bob Woodruff Foundation."

Additionally, wear blue's Gold Star and Surviving Youth Mentorship Program pairs children of fallen military with military mentors in a multi-month run-focused mentorship. The youth and mentor set goals, build a lifelong friendship, and complete in a 5K on Memorial Day.

Hallett says the wear blue events are designed to promote wellness as accessible to everyone. "While our name declares 'run' to remember, it truly is about the power of movement, and the power of movement in community." She notes. "The first step is getting out there. Whether it's walking around the block or going for a 5K run, we all have the power to be an athlete. Being an athlete simply means setting and working toward a physical goal. We all have different abilities, experiences, and body types, which means our goals will look different. But in wear blue, we can work on those goals in the support of community - on our own, but not alone. And the reality is, those goals are all achieved the same way... one step at a time. At the end of the day, nothing beats the satisfaction - physical, mental, emotional - of living a healthy, active life."