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A service member with his family shortly before being deployed.

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By DONNA BOYLE SCHWARTZ

"They also serve who only stand and wait," wrote the poet John Milton, and even today, nearly four centuries later, his words have a special resonance for military families. One national non-profit organization, Full Circle Home, is making sure that the family members of deployed service members are supported and honored for their contributions.

"I want to recognize those at home who may sometimes feel invisible and alone during the trials of a deployment, to let them know, 'We see you, we recognize all that you do and we appreciate you,'" explains Full Circle Home founder

Vickie Durfee. "I want people to think of our service members as sons and daughters, parents, friends and more. I want them to understand the personal sacrifice, but more than that, the humanity behind those who serve. I want to offer those who serve, and those who serve alongside of them, something that is not readily available, and to offer troops a way to connect with their source of support, to recognize those who are walking out this life in the military alongside of them, and show their appreciation and love.

"Our program is simple but with deep impact," she continues. "We package up gift sets that are

special and beautiful. The presentation and the quality of the gifts reflects how important those receiving the gifts are to people and businesses across the country. But it is SO much more than just a box of gifts. This program is a connection that spans the long distances of deployments. When people feel connected and supported by those they love and communities around them, they are strengthened and uplifted, fortifying a tenacity necessary to weather challenges that go with deployments."

Full Circle Home has served more than 37,500 people since its founding in 2007. "We will send out another 1,450 gift sets to the heroes at home this holiday," Durfee notes, adding "We plan on serving another 2,850 military families in 2025."

The group started as a small project by Durfee when one of her three children, son Gilchrist (Gil), enlisted in the Marines right out of high school. "I always was grateful that there were men and women willing to stand up for our country and serve; I never thought it would be my son," she recalls. "My dad was a fighter pilot in World War II and I know the impact it had on him. But I never considered ours a 'military family.' That changed when Gil enlisted. As so many moms do, I tried to talk him out of it. Now, I know

We're going to need a bigger truck!
USPS loves to bring their sleigh to load up with gifts!



it was the best thing for him. He became stronger, more patient, he realized his abilities and what commitment meant."

In 2006, Gil asked his mother to send a box of Christmas gifts to his then-girlfriend, who is now his wife. "Fast forward a year, and Gil was a squad leader of 12 Marines who were deploying to



Wrapping with Margot Elena. They have donated 2 full days of Christmas gifts for many years.

Iraq," Durfee says. "I thought it would be a good thing to offer this to his whole squad, thinking that I would be able to get a few people to help fund and prepare the gifts. A friend of mine knew someone whose son, Stuart, was deploying again. She connected us, and Lisa Miller and I became 'battle buddies.'"

Durfee and Miller organized volunteers to package and send 150 gift sets to the families of deployed service members, and Full Circle Home took off. "I had no idea the true power of what we had just done," Durfee recalls. "But a few days later I was shopping for my family's Christmas gifts and my cell rang. I didn't recognize the number but answered to a young woman sobbing. She had just opened her gift and was completely taken aback. Of course, I joined her and welled up myself, hiding behind a Christmas display with tears running down my face. That's when I realized what we had really done. We decided to just keep going and did 75 Valentine's gifts and 150 Mother's Day gifts. Since then, counting the 1450 we will send out this Christmas, we will

have connected almost 39,000 service members with their heroes at home."

With more than 1,000 volunteers across the country, Full Circle Home now sends gift sets for the December holidays, as well as Mother's Day, Father's Day, birthdays, anniversaries, and sometimes, "just because." Deployed service members from any branch of the military as well as patients at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center can participate in the program.

"All of Full Circle Home's programs revolve around a love note from a deployed service member, or injured service member at Walter Reed," Durfee details. "These are gift sets from the service member to their loved one, not a care package from the organization; Full Circle Home is merely the conduit. We include a personal note from us along with the service member's handwritten love note and gifts.


"We initially work about a year out connecting with units' Family Readiness staff or ships' ombudsmen," she adds. "When we're able, we will travel to the unit's deployment briefing, explain the program and have them register right then. Other times we mail the chaplain or other POC the appropriate number of forms and they take care of registration. We have also mailed them overseas if the unit is already deployed and we have time. As the holiday gets closer, we'll open up online registration if we still have gift sets available."

Full Circle Home solicits donations from cor-

porations to prepare the gift sets, which are standardized; one version for women and one version for men. Funding comes from sponsored wrapping events. "We work with companies who gather their employees for a one- to two-hour event at their offices," Durfee explains. "A

few vendors donate products. The stipulation is that we need 1,225 of an item, so it's a big donation when it comes. Margot Elena is one that has donated two full days of Christmas for many years, and has committed to do so as long as this program runs. Others give us products well below cost." The organization also hosts an "Honor Shoot" fundraiser and sends an annual appeal to individual donors and sponsors.

Durfee notes that many previous recipients of gift sets become volunteers or donors. "Military families are incredibly generous and many want to pay it forward and sponsor a future gift set," she points out. "Women have shared their wedding photos; troops have shared photos of their family; and many have told us their stories. All of these make us feel closer to those we're able to connect with and they know we're there for them in whatever capacity we can be.

"The story of Full Circle Home is a combination of the stories of all the troops and their loved ones," she adds. "There are many themes that keep playing out, showing the strength during challenges and the power of family." 

For more information, to volunteer or to donate, please visit: <http://www.fullcirclehome.org>



Lisa Miller and an injured and healing service member at WRNMMC.



Vickie Durfee and her son, Gil, at the L3Harris Road Show Kickoff, wrapping 4,000 gifts in 5 days in 8 L3Harris locations. Gil (pictured in the banner) was the inspiration for Full Circle Home.)



In Their Own Words

"I hardly take time to sit down and focus on ME. If it weren't for this program, I wouldn't have taken the time to sit and reflect on what I have done to keep our family going this deployment. It's a daily reminder of my husband's love for me!"

"Thank you so much for providing this wonderful service. I tell everyone that will listen that our loved ones have the hardest job of all, to carry on life as normal even though nothing is normal at all. My fiancé's support to me, her love and pride in my service to our great country makes it possible for me to do my job. They call us heroes for the job that we do, for putting on the uniform and answering the call. I want you to know that my fiancé is my hero and I'm so very proud of her. Thank you so very much for this service, this means more to me than anything you could ever send me. I'm glad that someone can send a gift to my hero."

"Thank you so much for what you are doing. I am currently serving in the U.S. Army in Kuwait and I have always believed military deployments are harder on the spouses left back home than on the soldiers. We are in a new place and busy so the time goes fast. Our wives have to be home seeing the house we are usually in, the bed we are usually sleeping next to them in, etc. Even if they are busy, they have constant reminders that we are away every day. The great work your organization does to recognize and thank them for all they do is awesome."

"My name is Marqueta R. and I would like to send the woman at home supporting me a gift. I am a single deployed mother of three beautiful girls. My mother, who usually cares for my girls recently passed away. My oldest daughter who just turned 18 years old May 10 stepped up to the plate to care for her sisters ages 12 and 4 during my deployment. I owe my daughter so much. She is my superwoman! Without her, I may have had to get out of the Navy on a hardship discharge after 17 years of faithful and zealous service. Without her love and support, my career could have been cut short. If at all possible, if she can receive a gift, I would be forever in your debt. Her name is Nyreisha and she means the world to me."

"I wanted to send whomever reads this a very tearful and heartfelt thank you. I have been a military wife for almost 10 years. My husband and I have faced five deployments together and he is currently deployed to Africa. I had no idea he signed us up for anything of this nature until I woke up to a box on my front porch. I was a little confused as to what it was and who it was from and when I opened it, I started crying. This deployment has been the hardest one we have ever faced even in comparison to his two tours in Afghanistan. With two growing school aged children, what can go wrong certainly has seemed to especially as a fulltime student myself. I had been so wrapped up in taking care of everyone else, that when I read the note included inside of the package, I couldn't help but cry (the Kleenex included were the perfect touch). You have no idea how much it touched my heart and how humbled I felt to receive even just a letter from someone I do not even know. It not only made my day better, but it gave me reassurance that just like every other deployment, we will make it through this one as well. Thank you all so much from the bottom of my heart! Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays. Kim T."

"This evening after we returned from walking our two dogs we found a small package by the garage door, addressed to my wife. Upon opening it a flood of tears ensued, since the contents included a personal note from our son who deployed to Afghanistan before Thanksgiving. As a veteran (of Vietnam) who was deployed many months away from a wife with four small children, I am perhaps more aware than many just how much such a selfless action like your organization can mean to those left behind, so an especially big thank you."

"I cannot tell you how wonderful what you are doing is, but I'll try. Being deployed from my family and listening to all my wife is doing back home without me makes me feel powerless to help and sometimes I don't know how to tell her thank you or to help encourage her. Your program is a way of telling her and showing her that I love her and am thinking of her. Thank you for all the good you do for those of us deployed away from our families!"