

Salute

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Storytime, Anytime

United Through Reading helps military families stay connected through the shared joy of reading together, even when far apart

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Editor's Letter

As a fellow educator, this issue's cover story featuring United Through Reading really resonated with me. My children are military children, and they often face the challenges of having a dad who is deployed for months at a time on a submarine. They rarely get to see or talk to him while he is gone, and I know how much they miss him. United Through Reading's work to ensure sustained connection through literacy and books is worthy and impactful. We hear all the time that children are resilient, and that is largely true. However, they still miss their deployed parents, and this is just one way that these kids can feel some sense of normalcy during the turbulence of military life. We here at SALUTE are so grateful for organizations like United Through Reading who do so much good work to make military life a little bit easier for these families who sacrifice so much.

Megan





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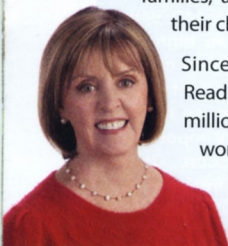
Children in military families often face a sense of disruption and isolation, especially when a parent is deployed. A unique non-profit organization, United Through Reading, is helping families stay connected by recording service members reading aloud, sharing the recordings with their families, and providing free books to their children.

Since 1989, United Through Reading has served more than 3.8 million military family members worldwide; in 2024 alone, the group facilitated more than 4,000 recordings and distributed more than

military families.

"Military families face a unique set of challenges," points out Dr. Sally Ann Zoll, a former elementary school teacher who earned a doctorate in educational leadership and management and has served as chief executive officer of United Through Reading since 2007. "Frequent relocations, long separations, and the unpredictability of military service can strain parents and children. These experiences can disrupt school routines and create emotional stress. On top of that, families often struggle to navigate time zone differences and inconsistent WiFi access, making regular video calls or live communication difficult.

"United Through Reading helps bridge those



Dr. Sally Ann Zoll

87,000 free books to

gaps by offering an on-demand way for children to see and hear their loved one reading to them, no matter the hour, location or time zone," she continues. "Children can engage with their loved one's recording whenever it best fits their routine—whether at bedtime, naptime, or when they need the comfort and reassurance of their loved one's voice. Our recordings provide comfort, routine, and a sense of normalcy that's so important during times of transition. At the same time, our free books help build strong literacy skills that set military children up for long-term academic success."

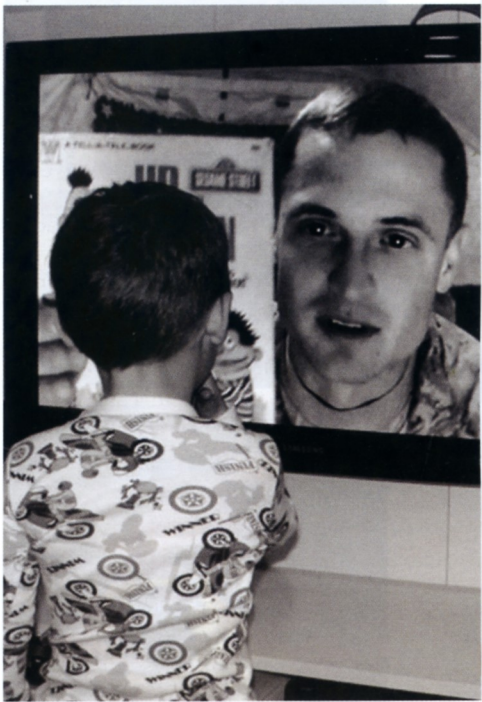
United Through Reading was founded in 1989 by Betty J. Mohlenbrock, M.Ed., an educator and military spouse who was raised in a family of educators and inspired by the importance of education from a young age. Her husband served in Vietnam for a year, and when he returned home from his tour of duty, their young daughter did not recognize him. This led her to create United Through Reading, to address family separation and childhood literacy challenges by encouraging families to read aloud together, even across distances; technological advances made it possible for service members to record themselves reading.

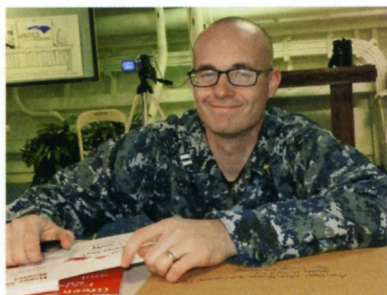
Zoll credits a similar experience with her involvement in the organization. "I was an Army spouse for almost 40 years. My husband's service meant our family experienced the long training cycles and separations familiar to many military families. Our son, recently retired from the Army, served combat tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, also experiencing the same separations from his family. When I joined United Through Reading in 2006, I knew firsthand how challenging it can be for families to stay connected during deployments, training, and duty assignments.

"When our son was deployed to the invasion

of Iraq with 72 hours' notice, I encouraged our daughter-in-law to video-record him reading Dr. Seuss books for their 18-month-old son before he left," she recalls. "We were not aware of United Through Reading then, but as educators, we recognized the power of our son keeping the tradition alive of reading to his son while he was deployed. Our son did not return home for 14 months, and his son picked him out of a crowd at the airport at midnight with joy and delight. I genuinely believe it was because of their emotional connection through those video-recorded stories.

"Betty's vision and my unknown implementation of it many years ago led us to where we are today," she adds. "That simple but powerful idea is United Through Reading. For over 35





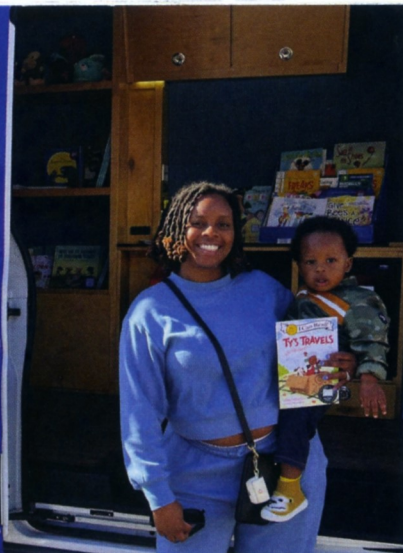
years, it has helped millions of military children and their loved ones remain connected through the shared joy of storytime."

United Through Reading offers several ways for military families to participate, including:

- **The United Through Reading App** A free, secure app that allows service members to record and share storytime videos from anywhere in the world.
- **Story Stations** In-person recording locations available on military installations, onboard ships, and at partner sites.
- **Mobile Story Stations** Specially outfitted vans that travel nationwide to military bases and events to provide on-site recording opportunities.
- **Book Distribution** Free, age-appropriate children's books that families keep, helping build home libraries and encouraging lifelong reading.

"Our mission is to keep military families connected through reading, no matter where service takes them," Zoll explains. "When a parent is deployed, training or away on assignment, children often experience emotional strain and disruption to their routines. United Through Reading helps restore a sense of normalcy by allowing children to see and hear their parents reading to them, anytime they need that comfort."

"Reading aloud nurtures emotional well-being and supports literacy development, which is especially critical for military children who face frequent school transitions," she continues. "Our programs aim to strengthen family bonds, support children's academic growth, and provide comfort during the most challenging times apart. We partner with military commands, family readiness centers, military support organizations, and community groups to help spread the word. We also utilize digital outreach and social media, and attend military-focused events to reach more families."



United Through Reading is free for all service members – including active duty, National Guard, Reserve and veterans—and for any child, from birth to age 18. The non-profit organization relies on generous support from individuals, foundations, corporate partners, and government grants. Corporate sponsors include Reader's Digest Foundation, Dollar General Literacy Foundation, Navy Federal Credit Union, BAE Systems, and Carter's Charitable Foundation. Fundraising events, in-kind donations, and legacy gifts also contribute to sustaining and expanding the group's mission.

Zoll has ambitious expansion plans. "As we look ahead to 2028, United Through Reading is committed to growing from a \$2 million organization to a \$3 million organization," she asserts. "This strategic growth will expand our impact, reach more military families worldwide, and enable us to develop innovative tools that enhance connection and learning.

"One key element of our growth strategy is partnering with mission-aligned corporations through our employee engagement program," she continues. "Companies that participate engage their teams in meaningful, hands-on

volunteer experiences, such as stuffing backpacks with books and literacy information, creating personalized bookmarks, and recording their storytime messages for military families and their own—a living memory. These activities contribute directly to our mission and enrich corporate culture by fostering empathy, purpose-driven teamwork, and a sense of giving back."

Zoll says the group has received many accolades from participants. "The stories we hear are powerful," she remarks. "One Navy mom shared that her children watched their dad's recording every single night while he was deployed—it became part of their bedtime routine and helped make his absence feel less overwhelming. Another military child learned to read by following along with their parents' videos.

"For many families, United Through Reading turns time apart into an opportunity for bonding, for comfort, and learning," she asserts. "Working together, we can build a stronger, more connected future for military families – one story at a time." 