

Focusing on the Families

By Bennett Leigh

Last summer, an idea took hold with some Army and Marine spouses, and what began as a grassroots political group has evolved into a nationwide, non-partisan organization, striving to be a new voice for military families.

Blue Star Families (BSF) began in July 2008 with five members and has already expanded to more than 22,000 members, with chapters at nearly 70 installations. BSF seeks to be a link between military families, the shapers of policy affecting military life, and the nation, according to its literature.

"A strong military is an American issue—not a political one," says Marine spouse Heidi DiEugenio, Executive Director and co-founder of BSF. The organization's leaders chose to make the switch to get more families involved, particularly those who do not want to be affiliated with a partisan agenda. "We felt we could reach more people, and frankly, get more done," says DiEugenio.

Through outreach with national and local organizations, civilian communities and government entities, BSF seeks to educate the nation in order to promote healthier families, aid in our military readiness, and contribute to our country's strength, according to their website.

"Military families are getting more attention these days," she says. "We'd like to collect military voices from across the country and be able to present them to those people who make the decisions. We're not interested in making the policies—just helping to shape them."



Blue Star Families member Kimberly Taylor-Beer and daughter, Sydney, with Michelle Obama during a Colorado Springs rally last Fall. Photo courtesy Tiffany Hays.

"For most of our history, much of the population was involved with the military in one way or another," says DiEugenio. "Now, less than 1 percent of our nation's population is in the military. Along the way, military families have lost some of their connection with society, and we'd like to change that. We need to put the human face of our military families back in our communities."

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—Heidi DiEugenio,
Blue Star Families Executive
Director and Co-Founder

Military families are the civilians "who also serve," say BSF leaders, and live in the intersection between the military and the larger society. This juxtaposition puts military families in a unique position to bridge the gap that has grown between America's military and the larger society so that together we can share the pride of service. BSF wants to help bridge that gap, says DiEugenio.

Finding Her Voice

Tiffany Hays, BSF chapter director for Colorado, says her involvement with BSF "completely fell in my lap." As a registered Independent, Hays went with a friend to the Democratic National Convention in Denver last year, "just to see what it was about." After the evening's event, she went with her friend to a local pub to wait out the crowds that were leaving. A conversation started with a man there, and the friends started talking about being military spouses and all the things they'd like to tell Democratic leaders if they had the chance.

"Then, this gentleman shocked us by saying he could make that happen—it ended up he was a big donor," she says. "We had a call within the week saying that Michelle Obama would like to meet with us and other military families to find out what is important to us."

For many military spouses, says Hays, a 16-year "veteran" spouse, "there's a fine line between expressing yourself and not wanting to be too vocal and maybe getting your husband in trouble. But I don't think there's any other occupation that affects the spouse and family so directly."

Hays' Air Force husband was deployed at the time, and Hays took that opportunity to get more involved with what turned out to be BSF, taking on a leadership role with the organization. "It gave me a place to funnel my energies," she says. "But I have been constantly amazed at the women I've met through Blue Star—how strong, how committed they are. We all know how great military spouses are, but this gives us a voice to the outside. We need that voice, and we didn't want to wait for someone else to do it."

Chapter and base leaders are general members who have volunteered to take a leadership role in their local communities. The chapter and base leader population reflects the officer and enlisted ranks of all five military branches as well as National Guard and Reserve units. In most areas, spouse and parent/veteran co-leaders are in place, enabling the local group to have access to, and meet the needs of, active duty spouses while at the same time providing long-term organizational consistency with the permanent residence of the parent or retiree.

Chapter and base leaders are encouraged to take entrepreneurial ownership of their local group by creating, organizing, planning, and implementing BSF projects and informational campaigns within the framework of the BSF mission statement, say leaders.

Each base chapter has the opportunity to create and implement an event around the national BSF focus. Members can choose how often they are involved and in what areas.

A Good Fit

BSF seeks to be a different kind of family organization, with no headquarters and an all-volunteer force. Membership is free, and the organization is completely virtual and out in the communities. "I think it really took off because it is part of this 'new media,'" says DiEugenio. "It fits

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into people's lives, instead of asking them to fit their lives around it."

BSF is a new model of civic engagement, say leaders, in which new media, social networking and on-the-ground interaction at base chapters located across the country are used to grow membership, and ideas and energy happen from the ground up, not the top down.

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Blue Star Families Chapter Director for Colorado Tiffany Hays at the Commander-in-Chief's Ball in January with Bob Woodruff, the ABC News correspondent who was seriously wounded on assignment in Iraq. Photo courtesy Tiffany Hays



DiEugenio says she's amazed at the sheer number and talent of BSF members who have stepped up to grow the organization and make it known. "We have some extraordinarily talented people," she says. "Everyone has their own network, and once we started spreading the word, it really took on a life of its own."

And at the core of BSF are strong, smart military family members. "There are a lot of professional spouses out there who now stay at home with their kids," says DiEugenio. "Now, they get to use their talents and feel that they are making a difference in their own lives and the lives of other military families. It's very attractive for them and very empowering at the same time."

BSF is not looking to become a lobbyist group, says DiEugenio. "That's not the niche we want to be in—we'd rather partner with groups like the National Military Families Association and other military family organizations to help spread the word about the issues important to these families."

"It's just a different way of doing things," she says. "But we feel we'd like to do one thing and do it right, rather than reinvent the wheel and compete with these organizations that are already in place. We have a good foundation; we're just trying to make it better."

One way BSF is trying to collect information is by posting periodic surveys on their website, where service members and family members are asked to rate their interest in topics varying from the housing market to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Participants can also rate their satisfaction with services for military families—from the quality of base housing to the accessibility and quality of the military health care system.

The goal is to engage military families and gather perspectives on all aspects of military life. BSF plans to use the results to better hone the issues that matter most to military families so presentations to policy makers can be more focused, says DiEugenio. BSF is also working on a new website, where forums and virtual contacts will help to better connect military families, no matter where they live, she says.

For more information, visit www.bluestarfam.org ●

Bennett Leigh is a freelance writer from Northern Virginia

Blue Star Families is one of many organizations dedicated to helping military families. Check out these and others to find the right fit for you:

Families United for Our Troops and Their Mission
www.familiesunitedmission.com

Gold Star Family Support
www.goldstarfamilysupport.org

Military Child Education Coalition
www.militarychild.org

Military Families United
www.militaryfamiliesunited.org

Military Spouse Corporate Career Network
www.msccn.org

My Army Life Too
www.myarmylifetoo.com

National Military Families Association
www.nmfa.org

Operation: Mom
www.operationmom.org

Sgt. Mom's www.sgtmoms.com

Silent Warriors www.silentwarriors.net

Veterans and Families
www.veteransandfamilies.org

Association of the United States Army
www.ausa.org/programs/familyprograms