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Remembering the Fallen on Memorial Day

By Cathy Tyson



Yolanda Vega with a picture of her son Jonathan Antonio Vega Yelner. Photo Cathy Tyson

How can a family deal with the loss of a child to war? It's every parent's worst nightmare. Lafayette mother Yolanda "Jolie" Vega knows that pain and trauma; her son, Jonathan "Antonio" Vega Yelner, was killed in action in Afghanistan in 2008. He was 24 years old, grew up in Burton Valley, attended St. Perpetua School and graduated from De La Salle High School. "Not a day goes by that I don't miss him," said Vega.

"The local Blue Star Moms, a non-partisan, non-profit organization of parents who have children actively serving in the military, appeared out of nowhere after everyone left," said Vega. Following the initial shock, they offered strength and support. Vega was so moved by their generosity and helpfulness that she went on to found the Golden Gate chapter of Gold Star Moms.

"The point is to keep the memories of our children alive and offer solace to families with the long struggle of losing a child," said Vega, who is a proponent of dealing with "the elephant in the room."

Vega explained how family and friends can be at a loss for words following a death; that uncomfortable silence "hurts us to the bottom of our hearts." She and other parents of deceased soldiers would prefer just a hug or some kind of acknowledgement.

While Walnut Creek has a lovely Veteran's Memorial Plaza and Danville has remembrances throughout the town, Vega noted there's nothing like that in Lafayette. She would like to see some kind of permanent memorial at the new library, and said that while the hillside full of crosses is a great visual reminder, someday those will probably come down.

The Gold Star Moms participate in a number of events throughout the year to support each other and honor the

supreme sacrifice their children made. There's a three day retreat at the Marines Memorial Club in San Francisco that offers counseling, fellowship and togetherness. "There's an unspoken familiarity with folks who have been through the same painful experiences," said Vega. "I look forward to it, but it's bittersweet."

During the holidays she and other Gold Star Moms participate in the Wreaths Across America project, where volunteers lay wreaths at cemeteries throughout the East Bay and across the country.

Their chapter of Gold Star Moms has sponsored "Every Mile a Memory" - a run for the fallen - and has helped out at the bi-annual East Bay Stand Down event that provides health care and services for needy and homeless veterans.

Since Sept. 11, 2001, more than 16,000 service members have died during active duty. A National Military Family Bereavement Study is underway to examine the impact of these deaths on surviving family members. The study is conducted by the Uniformed Services University of Health Sciences, Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress in Bethesda, Md. For more information about the study, visit www.militarysurvivorstudy.org.

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