

2016 Presents For Patriots Update



Hello all,

For the 4th year Operation Barnabas of Des Moines partnered with Freedom Alliance for their Presents for Patriots program. Our group adopted 4 disabled Veterans and their families for Christmas, and again it was an amazing and heartwarming experience to bless these families in such big ways. Thank you to everyone who helped make this year's effort such a success! Please share this message with those you know who helped.

Each family received some sweets and goodies, a handmade quilt for every child, a queen sized patriotic quilt for each soldier, a personalized laser etched glass trivet with the family's last name on it, \$300 worth of gift cards, and a check for \$455. On December 13th I drove to Fort Riley, KS where two of the

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2016 Presents For Patriots Update

soldiers were currently living and the third family we adopted was driving to attend the Freedom Alliance Christmas party for members of the Warrior Transition Battalion. I also attended that event. The next day I met the fourth family outside of Kansas City on my trip back to Des Moines. Below are the highlights of meeting with each family.

First family I met with was Army Sgt. 1st Class Heath A., his girlfriend Melissa, and their 3 kids. He was active duty for 5 years with two deployments and has since been in the Reserves training soldiers in small arms operation and marksmanship. He has suffered repeated shoulder injuries, neck and hip problems, hearing loss, and PTSD. He's had a rough time transitioning back into family life, adjusting back to family routines, physical limitations his body isn't used to, and increased memory loss. He is going through medical separation from the Army, and begun counseling. He is trying to repair relationships with his kids now. He currently works for the small town he lives in doing some maintenance work. He and his family have a good sense of humor and we all laughed some about some randomness and fun movie quotes. He was very impressed by the custom glasswork and the Patriotic quilt, and his daughter Annica (6) was excited about the candy and her Dora the Explorer quilt. Heath and Melissa's jaws dropped and eyes got real big when I told them about the gift card and check amounts. Melissa teared up some and Heath said "there are not enough words to thank you." He continued that "this was so much more than I was expecting" and that they'll now have a "great Christmas." After the Christmas Party, Alicia from Freedom Alliance shared with me that Heath's family came up to her with tears of joy following our meeting.

The second family I met with was Army Staff Sgt. Juan R., his wife Val, and their three young children. He was in the Army for almost 11 years with three combat tours to Afghanistan. He initially sustained a back injury from a paratrooper accident and later suffered additional injuries when the vehicle he was in rolled off a cliff. His back and knee injuries have limited him greatly while his PTSD, social anxiety, and Adjustment Disorder have made his transition difficult. The biggest problem is knowing that his mind hasn't been the same since. He described himself as someone who loved physical activity, but he is having a challenging time accepting the physical limitations now on his body. Initially his wife spoke more for him, saying he came from Mexico when he was 17, that he adapted well when joining the military, and they were high school sweethearts. When he mentioned that they were previously stationed in Alaska for about 3 years, he seemed much more excited and engaged describing some of the beauty there and how relaxing it was, all the activities to do in nature there, some of the strange aspects of living there, and his kids teaching them how to make snowballs and large snowmen. He noted that sometime later, they would like to move back to Alaska. His final order comes before the New Year, and his family will be moving to the Houston area where she has family. He would like to head back to school, but he is unsure of what he is capable of doing now. He would like to work with his hands. She is in the National Guard and will be making her first deployment in the first half of the coming year. Juan admitted he has put his family through a lot and has missed too many important family events and milestones. Since this is his last Christmas as a soldier he wants it to be memorable and begin making a difference to his family. Juan and Val really liked the glasswork and were excited about all the quilts. The children were happy with the sweets and their quilts. Juan showed some tears

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2016 Presents For Patriots Update

while his wife had a huge smile on her face when I shared the gift cards and check amounts. They fumbled for words, but they were filled with gratitude. They were tremendously appreciative and wanted to thank everyone who helped.

Family #3 was Army Sgt. Demetrius S., his wife Shannon, and their 3 kids. Due to scheduling constraints and his health after a long day, this was my shortest meeting of the families. Just before Demetrius's second deployment he was having health issues like heavy fatigue, feeling "out of my body," and "strange smells" that overpowered his senses. It was later discovered he had a cancerous tumor on his brain. He had one brain surgery, then days later become unresponsive and underwent an emergency surgery to remove part of his cranial bone due to brain swelling. Two months later a third surgery to replace the cranial bone that thankfully hadn't deteriorated during that timeframe. Months later he began having a series of seizures that shocked the family since they thought the worse was behind them. He's struggled and says he still has a lot of bad days, but the therapies and medicines have helped him have more good days. He and Shannon were high school sweethearts and have been married 20 years. They missed most of the Freedom Alliance party due to one of their children having a school concert. During the concert apparently they received praise from other parents about how well behaved their kids were and both parents seemed to take pride in teaching the kids manners. Shannon comes from a family of caregivers so her family has been instrumental in helping during the hard times. Demetrius also had family members help regularly. Both his and her families are largely in the Chicago area. With all the travel and guests they've had, they were looking forward to a quiet Christmas at Fort Riley with just their household. They are expecting his final order some time perhaps around March, but at that point Shannon would like to see if it is possible to push that back to allow the kids to finish the school year before moving back to Chicago. Shannon noticed their name on the glasswork before he did due to his vision issues, but both were pleased with it. The quilts were a big hit with them with Demetrius saying he enjoys bundling up under several blankets and joked with his older son "don't you be taking MY quilt." Shannon was clearly moved by the generosity and gave me a couple big hugs, and Demetrius had a huge smile on his face after I shared the news. Shannon said our group was a "wonderful blessing" and Demetrius said we were "a big help."

The next day I met the last family at their home outside of Kansas City. Army Staff Sgt. Michael Z. and his wife Christal are particularly friendly and interesting couple. Their two daughters were at school when we met. He joined the Army in 1993 and served almost 22 years in the Army through several deployments. He had a fascinating career and is very fortunate to still be alive. He started his Army career clearing minefield where there was a very short life expectancy, but made it through that without harm. He served on the DMZ in Korea during a time when North Korea was aggressively testing weapons and was a guard at Leavenworth Prison multiple times. During a tour in Afghanistan they were posted in a particularly hot zone that came under frequent attacks, including a mortar attack that destroyed the truck he was supposed to be unloading at the time but he was given permission to step away briefly because it was one of the few times for "phones up" to contact his wife after a prolonged period of no communication. During his last tour of Afghanistan his vehicle came under attack and the vehicle rolled down the side of a mountain. He suffered a traumatic brain injury, broken ribs, multiple

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2016 Presents For Patriots Update

damaged areas of the spine, and tendon injuries to his dominant arm. After over a month and half, he was able to be back stateside and began therapy at Walter Reed. Initially he had significant problems with speech impediments, memory loss, and vision problems as a result of the TBI. He's since made big advancements as part of a 15 year study on TBI that he is now in the fourth year of that entails extensive testing and training the brain to improve memory and cogitative functions. He's done years of aqua therapy and Botox injections, and this was something we discussed in depth since I've also spent years doing rehabilitation in the pool and had a series of injections due to nerve complications from my car accident. Christal has family in the area, but she said that she couldn't have made it through the last deployments and recovery phases without the great church they are a part of. Their pastor previously served and wanted to make sure the church whatever was needed to help their family while Michael was away. Through another Veteran support organization, he was able begin schooling in IT security measures, and he plans to continue for several professional certifications and a degree. He is hoping to eventually get a job in Cyber Criminology. He showed me an impressive collection of mementos and awards he has received. They enjoyed the custom glasswork and began almost immediately discussing where they could display it without the girls or the dog potentially breaking it. The quilts were a huge success including with one of the quilts having a princess on it that matched the large wall display of one daughter's bedroom. Both were initially in disbelief by the amounts, but then were tremendously appreciative. He thanked me repeatedly and said they'll have a "really great Christmas" and that this was "much greater than I hoped" while she noted they were "very blessed" and wanted me to thank those that helped.

It was an honor and pleasure to deliver the donations to these families. Thank you to everyone who helped make this year's Presents for Patriots a huge success! Please forward this to those you know who helped. I provided my contact info to each family, and I will pass along any updates I receive from the families.

Take care and Merry Christmas,

Travis C. Ratliff

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