



Survivor's Link

COMMUNICATING INFORMATION AND RESOURCES



Survivor's Day at the Races Honors Gold Star Family Members

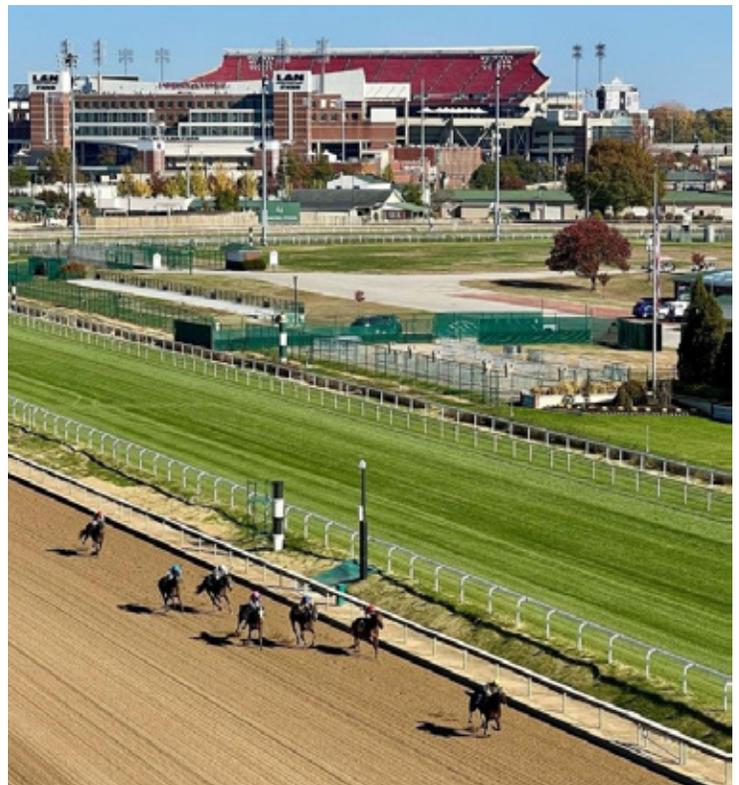
By Alicia McCoy, Navy Gold Star Coordinator

Navy Gold Star Program coordinators Maura Bradshaw (NGS-West) and Alicia McCoy (NGS-East) supported the U.S. Army Survivor Outreach Services and the Woody Williams Foundation's 13th Annual Survivor's Day at the Races event held at the world-renowned Churchill Downs Racetrack in Louisville, Kentucky, Nov. 5.

The event was held the same weekend as the Breeder's Cup and was open to all Gold Star family members from all service branches, providing a fun, welcoming activity that also allowed for fellowship and information sharing among survivors. Entrance to the event included a fully catered meal, support services, music, and fun all from the comfort of the coveted Millionaire's Row situated on level 4 of the venue. This location provided a prime race-watching area under a covered terrace with a full view of the racetrack.

The Gold Star family members were welcomed by David Orange, the Kentucky Air National Guard SOS program coordinator, and a Gold Star family member sang the national anthem at the start of the race day. The event also included a children's room with face painting and crafts along with live musical entertainment for everyone to enjoy. Speeches were delivered by both SOS and Woody Williams Foundation representatives. There was a lot of smiling, conversing and general fun being had by attendees. Survivors were even invited to step outside during one of the races where, while waving small American flags, they watched skydivers fly both the American and "Honor and Remember" flags.

Navy Gold Star was proud to participate in this fantastic opportunity to support our survivors and fellow resource programs. As always, please watch your inbox for future event information and invitations from your local Navy Gold Star coordinators.





Wellness By Nature

By Olena Parry, Navy Gold Star Coordinator

Tis' the season we say. While originally this saying referred to the time between Thanksgiving and Christmas/New Year, these days it seems to indicate the season of holiday stress, illness, winter blues, social isolation, and triggered trauma. By now many of us have a list of true and tried coping skills, some healthier than others, as we are preparing for the upcoming winter months. We may be conflicted between joy of the holidays and sadness of missing a loved one, which makes this time of the year particular challenging from a mental health perspective. This year, I encourage you to add one more resource to your toolbox – time in nature.

The National Institute of Health (December 2022) reviewed multiple studies on the impact of nature on human health. Consistent findings revealed reduced social isolation, increased social connectedness, reaffirming confidence in one's abilities, and an increase of physical activity. Exposure to nature lowers stress, increases empathy, may reduce risk of disorders, and improves mental health. This is particularly true when we are exposed to outdoor blue and green spaces due to the biodiversity of forests and oceans.

Exposure to nature is a lot more enjoyable in the summer months, so how do we manage in the cold and dreary winter months when spending time under a blanket near a fireplace is a lot more pleasant? Here are some ideas:

- Pour your morning coffee/tea in a to-go cup and drink it on your porch. Bonus points for taking a stroll through the neighborhood!
- Hang a bird feeder outside your window and take some time to watch the birds.
- Grow indoor plants.
- Create nature-inspired art.
- Whenever outside, stop, notice nature around you, look for the shades of green and blue, and take a few deep breaths.
- Use "happy light" lamps for the days you can't leave the house.

And remember, there is no such thing as bad weather – only bad clothing!

23 Ways to Remember Loved Ones During the Holidays

By Hailey Chittick, Navy Gold Star Coordinator

The holiday season is often a time of joy and celebration, but for those who are grieving the loss of a loved one, it can be a challenging period filled with mixed emotions. While our loved ones may no longer be with us in the physical sense, their memory can very much be a part of our holiday celebrations. Be creative and check in with yourself about what feels right. If you need a little inspiration, here are 23 ideas for remembering departed loved ones this holiday season.



- 1. Share photos.** Display old photo albums in a location accessible to holiday visitors. Before you know it you'll be reminiscing and telling stories with family and friends. Are all of your photos digital? Create a shared album online and allow others to upload their photos, too!
- 2. Watch old home videos.** Yes, you may get emotional, but it's also comforting to see your loved one up on the TV screen. Again, this is a great opportunity for storytelling and reminiscing.



- 3. Light a candle.** Take a quiet moment to light a candle in memory of your loved one. Leave it burning during days when you think you'll miss them the most.



- 4. Write a letter to your loved one about what happened over the past year.** Share your thoughts and emotions, the good and the bad. You can keep the letter in a special place or even burn it after writing – whatever feels right to you.
- 5. Dedicate a space to their memory.** Whether it's on a shelf, the mantle, the top of a dresser, or whatever feels right, dedicate a space to honor your loved one and help you feel connected to them. Make it yours by adding photos, art, letters, a candle, and special momentos.
- 6. Rehome belongings.** After a loss, it can be hard to part with your loved one's belongings. The holidays present the perfect opportunity to give away some of these things, especially if you are someone who always wants to make sure that old treasures go to good homes. Wrap up a few of your loved one's old things and give them to family and friends who will appreciate them. Write a card letting the recipient know why you chose to give them this particular item.



- 7. Donate to a cause in your loved one's name.** Support a charity that was near and dear to your loved one's heart.
- 8. Volunteer your time to others in need.** You might choose a cause your loved one worked with themselves or simply volunteer with others who knew them.

9. **Express gratitude.** Send thank you notes to those who were special to your loved one. Thank them for bringing the gift of friendship and love into the world through their relationship with your loved one.
10. **Buy a gift.** When you see a gift your loved one would have liked, go ahead and buy it. Donate it to a charity or give it to someone as a gift.



11. **Buy or make a memorial ornament.** Buy a new ornament every year that reminds you of your loved one. If children are affected by the loss, invite them to help you select the ornament or even allow them the opportunity to make the ornament themselves.
12. **Give a framed photo** of your loved one to people who also miss them.
13. **Watch your loved one's favorite movie.** Did your loved one have a specific movie they always watched around the holidays? Put on your comfiest pajamas and cozy up on the couch for a movie night. Don't forget snacks!
14. **Create a playlist.** Build a list of songs that remind you of your loved one. Include songs from some of their favorite artists and songs that bring back happy memories of times spent with them.



15. **Host a holiday potluck.** Use your loved one's old recipes to make holiday dinner or ask guests to make a dish that your loved one liked. It definitely doesn't have to be a normal holiday dish – just a table full of all sorts of food that your loved one enjoyed!

16. **Set a place for your loved one at the dinner table.** Consider laying out a special tablecloth and fabric markers for guests to write down their favorite holiday memories, especially those that involve family members who are no longer present.
17. **Create a special place for guests to share memories.** Leave a box, slips of paper and pens out, and ask friends and family to write down their favorite holiday memories, memories of your loved one, or notes of gratitude. Ask them to put their slips in the box and read them aloud over dessert.
18. **Make a toast.** Before digging into your holiday meal, pass out your loved one's favorite drink so family and friends can toast to their memory.
19. **Visit or spend time in a place where you feel close to your loved one.** Choosing a designated time, like first thing in the morning, may make it easier to plan and uphold this tradition in the future.
20. **Start a new tradition.** Introduce a new holiday tradition that celebrates your loved one's memory.
21. **Take the trip.** Hit pause on your holiday traditions altogether and take the trip you have been planning or dreaming about.
22. **Make a New Year's resolution.** Whether it's giving blood, mentoring someone, or volunteering your time and skills to a community effort, make a New Year's resolution that will honor your loved one throughout the coming year.



23. **Take care of yourself.** The holidays can be particularly challenging. Don't hesitate to seek support from others or professional help, if needed. Attend a workshop or support group for people dealing with a loss during the holidays. Ask your Navy Gold Star coordinator about grief resources in your area.



A Survivor's Story

By Elizabeth Blanchette, Gold Star Spouse of Sgt. Michael Blanchette, U.S. Army

My late husband was Sgt. Michael J. Blanchette; his date of death was April 11, 2010. He gave me a warning before he left for northern Afghanistan in regard to possibly coming home in a body bag. He knew this deployment might be the end. He made it to his rest and recuperation period, which was the most exciting day of my life and our daughter's life (she was two at the time). We spent time adjusting to a family schedule. On April 11, 2010, he took his own life.

I did not have a lot of support and was considered an outsider due to the nature of his death until I started to speak up about our situation. I ended up finding support via my Army Survivor Outreach Services (SOS) coordinator. I then found more support through some of the Facebook support groups of other widows in the same situation as myself. Over the years, I have found more support with one close widow, my daughter (since she is now older), and some other people that have been put on my path.

I was asked shortly after his death to attend meetings of the Association of the United States Army (AUSA) as a SOS representative for the area. I lobbied for a change of action on Gold Star license plates for Washington state and assisted with emailing in regard to the Survivor Benefit Plan (SBP)/Dependent Indemnity Compensation (DIC) offset change. My daughter and I came up with the idea of the Gold Star tree for Fort Lewis in 2010.

My daughter has been to many Snowball Express events, and has received support from Angels of America's Fallen (who helped fund her love of music), music camp with A Soldier's Child Foundation, Believe With Me, and the Sugar Bear Foundation.

We have since moved from our home roots in Washington to Maryland. I never thought I would leave the West Coast, but I decided to uproot my children and myself to be with a new partner. Since that relocation, that partner and I have broken up, but I am now happily involved with someone who accepts me and my beautiful children along with our full schedule (football, cheerleading and marching band). Being 38 years old and going back to college for the third time in my life is not easy, especially with three kids, but having the support of each other and saying the positive words we do has helped during the hardest moments. There have been many tears shared with my teen but we are each other's support in a lot of ways.

I am a team mom for cheerleading and the manager for our local community clothing closet. I am currently lobbying for a property tax exemption for military widows and also recently started to mentor a new widow. The one key thing I told her to do daily before she gets out of bed is to ask herself, "What are three things I am grateful for?" Go forward with knowing to be grateful for today. Fill your cup with what you need to be grateful for.



Navigating Grief Through Winter: Embracing Traditions and Self-Care

By April Tischler, Navy Gold Star Coordinator

Exempt from adhering to a calendar and the winter months, grief can bring a unique set of challenges. The holiday lineup season, typically associated with joy and togetherness, can shine a spotlight on where you are in your journey. With proactive steps, you can find solace in traditions and family time during the winter months.

Much like acknowledging cooler winter temperatures, self-awareness in acknowledging your emotions is key. It's okay to feel sad, angry or lost during the holidays. The kindest thing you can do is to give yourself permission to grieve and understand that these feelings are part of the healing process.

Grief can be an isolating experience, especially during the winter when the days are shorter and the nights are longer. Reach out to grief support groups, either in-person or online, to connect with others who are going through similar experiences. These groups offer a safe space for sharing and healing. The Navy Gold Star Program can provide referrals to organizations to access support.

While it's important to honor your loved one's memory, consider introducing new traditions that can help you navigate the holiday season with a renewed sense of purpose. These traditions can be as simple as lighting a candle in memory of your loved one or volunteering your time to a charitable cause in their honor. Embrace activities that bring you comfort and joy. Preserving traditions you shared with your lost loved one is a beautiful way to keep their memory alive. Whether it's preparing a favorite meal, visiting a special place, or sharing stories about them, these rituals can help you maintain a connection with your loved one.

Self-care strategies for managing stress:

Prioritize self-care. Make self-care a non-negotiable part of your winter routine. This might include taking long walks in the crisp winter air, indulging in a favorite hobby, or setting aside quiet time for meditation or relaxation.

Maintain a healthy routine. Even in the shorter days of winter, maintaining a balanced daily routine with adequate sleep, regular meals, and physical activity can help manage stress and keep you grounded.

Seek help. If grief becomes overwhelming, don't hesitate to consult a therapist or counselor. They can provide valuable coping strategies and emotional support tailored to your specific needs. You can reach out to your Navy Gold Star coordinator for resources and referrals.

Express your feelings creatively. Many people find comfort in creative expressions of their emotions, such as writing in a journal, painting or crafting. These outlets can be therapeutic and provide a healthy way to process your grief.

Grief doesn't take a holiday, but with the right support, proactive steps and self-care, you can navigate the winter months with a sense of connection and hope.



Nature Can Assist Us With Grief

By Mary Conant, Gold Star Mother of Lt. Col. Sean M. Judge, U.S. Air Force

I've always been one to turn to nature in difficult times. Therefore, it was only natural for me to do so after my son died. Being in nature gives us a sense of peace.

Shortly after my son passed, those peaceful areas didn't appeal to me. In fact, it was at times, very difficult for me to get out of the house. I did the necessary chores, but other things seemed too strenuous or they would take too much effort and for what reason I would question. What could ever bring me solace again? My son was my world, he and I were a team. We had many years alone together after his father and I divorced. Sean brought me so much happiness and fun times. I just couldn't imagine my life without him. I didn't want to imagine that nor did I want to live without him.

However, that would not be possible because as the saying goes, "Life goes on." Whether or not we want it to – it does. Rather than waste my life, I decided to get up and get out. It wasn't easy at first. I had to push myself, and even though it may have been a glorious day, it was gloomy in my heart and soul. But, I did it. I walked a few miles each day taking in the lovely scenery, the birds and nature in general. After a while, it brought me back to serenity and solace.

I was walking in a nature reserve in the state of Maine one day and I saw a notice that they were holding a bird walk on the upcoming Saturday. It would begin at 7 a.m. I live about one hour from this reserve, which meant I would need to leave no later than 6 a.m. Although I am not a big morning person, I made myself get up and get going to the reserve.

I met some wonderful people, birders as they are known. They pointed out so many bird species that I had never heard of, and I was hooked on "birding." Since that time I have been to many more reserves, refuges, national parks, and local areas that are good for birding. I have learned so much over the years and made some very good friends and acquaintances. I suggest you might try it; not necessarily the birding, but getting out into nature.

Some other things that also give me solace and help me to keep a closeness to my son is to do some of the things we had done together over the years. It makes me feel as though he's still with me. I also wear a pin with his photo; it is my "tattoo." Oftentimes people ask me about it and then they will share a story of someone they lost. It gives them and me some comfort. We never know what someone else may be going through at any time.



**Bronson McGurk,
10 years old**

**Florian McGurk,
7 years old**



Navy Gold Star Hosts Virtual Fall Art Contest

During the month of October, the Navy Gold Star Program held a Virtual Fall Art Contest that invited children and siblings to submit a photo of art that represented fall. The winning artwork was submitted by Helen Tin, surviving spouse of Maj. Stewart McGurk, U.S. Army. She provided pictures drawn by their children, Bronson, 10, and Florian, 7. Congratulations to Bronson and Florian for their artwork, and to their mom, Helen, for participating! We appreciate you and look forward to future works of art from these young artists.



EFMP and Navy Gold Star Host Wellness Retreat at Pacific Beach

By Olena Parry, Navy Gold Star Coordinator

The Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP), Navy Gold Star Program, Morale, Welfare and Recreation (MWR), and Navy Region Northwest marketing teamed up to coordinate a free weekend Wellness Retreat at Pacific Beach, Sept. 29-Oct. 1, for 40 multi-generational participants, ranging from ages 2-70, with various medical conditions and trauma impacts.

The design of the weekend was guided by a review of multiple research studies that showed the positive impact of nature-based and primarily nonverbal intervention activities on human health that supported restorative practices, celebrated curiosity, encouraged usual and unusual connections, and connecting with others. Activities included “forest bathing” in the Quinault Rainforest, fire pits and s’mores in the moonlight, and mindful art through canvas painting and tie-dye.

Because many EFMP and Gold Star families have limited opportunities and capacity to engage in regular activities and are significantly more financially impacted than other military families, the weekend offered an opportunity to expand from survival to growth, which was reflected in very positive comments from attendees: “The entire annual wellness retreat evolution contributed greatly to my family’s well-being.” The event was a huge success, providing participants a community with shared experiences, impacts and healing through the wellness retreat activities.

Holiday Traditions After a Loss

By Maura Bradshaw, Navy Gold Star Coordinator

“And when those blue snowflakes start falling, that’s when those blue memories start calling.”

– “Blue Christmas” by Elvis Presley

The holiday season is approaching and you’ve lost someone you love. How do you honor and remember them while still finding meaning in the season as defined by your family’s values and beliefs? You may want to spend some time in reflection or in family discussion regarding existing traditions. How did your family celebrate before the loss? Is there something new to incorporate? With these questions in mind, let’s review a few possible options.

Music: Does your family play a particular song or type of music during the holiday season? Did your loved one have a favorite holiday song that you can play? Making a playlist with these songs together as a family could be an activity that could bring out lots of memories as songs are suggested.

Candles: This can be as simple as lighting a candle in memory of your loved one. Feel free to use a battery-operated candle if you are uncomfortable with a lit candle or if it causes safety concerns. A more involved integration of candles is to have a candle ceremony where everyone holds an unlit candle. The first person lights the first candle and shares a memory. They can share a memory of their deceased loved one, a memory from past holidays, or a time during the year when they felt their loved one’s presence or anything else that feels comforting. After the first person shares their memory, they light the candle of the next person and that person shares a memory, and so on and so forth. Once the last candle is lit, many will choose to do something to close out the ceremony, such as sing a song, read a poem, or say a prayer.

Food: Choose your loved one’s favorite dish (or recipe) and make sure the dish is present at your celebration year after year. If they had a sweet tooth, instead of choosing a dish, choose their favorite dessert to make every year, or perhaps choose both. We also aren’t locked into just dinner. Holiday mornings may involve lots of good memories, and perhaps you could have a smaller gathering of your immediate family members having your loved one’s favorite breakfast foods. The after-dinner wind down could provide the opportunity to start a tradition of remembering the person who is no longer present with discussion over cookies and hot cocoa or eggnog. This brings in a favorite tradition of using your loved one’s favorite recipe to make holiday cookies.

An Extra Plate: Some families like to add an extra plate to the dinner table as a tangible symbol of their loved one’s presence in everyone’s hearts and minds.

Memory or Gratitude Box: Leave a box, slips of paper and pens out, and ask friends and family to write down their favorite holiday memories, memories of loved ones, or something that evokes gratitude. Ask them to put their slips in the box and read them over dessert; perhaps with the cookies and coco previously mentioned.

Remembrance Ornaments and Trees: If your holiday traditions involve ornaments, add a new ornament to your collection that reminds you of your loved one. This could be done once or annually, store bought or handcrafted. Some find it helpful to focus on an ornament that symbolizes their loved one. This is an opportunity to incorporate children if they are impacted by the loss. The children could be invited to help you select the ornament or be provided the opportunity to make the ornament themselves.

Stockings and Garlands: If you hang stockings by the fire with care, set out some paper and pens and suggest guests write about experiences that make them think of your loved one, words of encouragement to other family members, words of appreciation for other family members, or gratitudes. These could be placed in the stocking or clipped to a garland. Another suggestion is to put out a stocking for the family member who passed and add small items to it that you know they would enjoy. These items could inspire conversations about why they were selected and the memory associated with them.

Moment of Silence: Sometimes the simplest approach is the best. At your holiday celebration have a moment of silence in memory of the person who has passed.

Do you have another suggestion or tradition your family practices to keep the memory of your loved one present at this time of year that you are comfortable sharing? Feel free to reach out to your Navy Gold Star coordinator with this information. We always appreciate the opportunity to connect with and get to know you better. Additionally, if you believe that you may benefit from some additional care over the next weeks, do not hesitate to contact your coordinator. We know this time of year is different for everyone, and we are here to meet you wherever you are on your grief journey. It is our great honor to support your family during this and every season of the year.

Navy Gold Star Coordinators

Area of Responsibility	Phone
California (Los Angeles County/Northern CA), Japan, Guam, Korea	901-671-6720
California (San Diego/Riverside), Colorado, Utah, Hawaii	901-930-8290
California (San Diego/Riverside), Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada	901-930-8308
Oregon, Idaho, Montana, Wisconsin, Nebraska, Minnesota, Canada	901-930-8062
Washington, Alaska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Wyoming, Iowa	901-671-7519
Texas	901-930-8109
Michigan, Illinois, Indiana	901-930-8593
Kansas, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Missouri, Tennessee	901-930-8300
Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Europe	901-671-6521
Pennsylvania, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Maine	901-671-6910
New York, New Jersey, Vermont, New Hampshire	901-930-8388
West Virginia, Delaware, Maryland, and these counties in Virginia: Arlington, Fairfax, Loudoun, Prince William, Alexandria, King George, Manassas, Dumfries, Fauquier, Stafford, Spotsylvania	901-930-8578
Virginia (any county not in Northern Virginia)	901-930-8008
North Carolina, Kentucky, Ohio	901-930-8210
Georgia, South Carolina	904-542-5712
Florida	904-542-5706

Note: All postal mail should be sent to the below address.

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