

# Surviving spouse gives back to military community

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The death of any Soldier is painful, but for Kim Felts, a Family Readiness Program Specialist at Fort Bragg, it has become a reason to give back to the military community.

In 1984, Kim married her childhood sweetheart, Tom Felts. At the time, he was assigned to the 101st Airborne Division at Fort Campbell, Ky.

“We were lucky to start off in the 101st,” she said.

According to Kim, the group was already close and that made her introduction to Army life enjoyable.

“We were lucky to have great battalion leadership and it really showed us great role models for what was ahead for a successful officer.”

The spouse meetings became a way for her to get involved. Between craft nights, hails and farewells, and a variety of social opportunities, Kim formed bonds with the spouses. She and Tom also came to know what was happening within the battalion and what it took to create a community from a group of Soldiers.

Among those larger lessons, small things like having a ragtop convertible similar to the one his battalion commander drove became goals that stuck with Tom.

During the next 23 years, the Felts family experienced many moves and began to grow. The couple had four children born at different duty stations – Fort Campbell; Augsburg, Germany and Fort Huachuca, Ariz.

Throughout his career, Tom served the National Guard, Army Reserve and active-duty components.

He even succeeded in getting his own convertible when he became a battalion commander.

“He had arrived when he got to get that ragtop,” said Kim.

Then everything changed.

While a senior service fellow in the Advance Operational Art Studies Fellowship of the School of Advanced Military Studies at Fort Leavenworth, Kan., Tom decided he

wanted more experience. Since he had never deployed, he volunteered to serve a tour in Iraq.

On November 14, 2006, Col. Thomas H. Felts was killed by an IED during Operation Iraqi Freedom. He was 45 years old.

Kim soon learned that she was the only widow living at Fort Leavenworth. In an email sent to her sister-in-law at the time, Kim jokingly wrote, "I think I'm the only person with four children ever to lose their husband in war."

In 2006, there was no support group in place to assist the Families of the fallen. Kim recalls the Fort Leavenworth Casualty Assistance Officer being helpful to make the transition smooth, but it was still a lonely time.

"There wasn't any support," she recalled. "Nobody was talking about it. I didn't know I needed to talk about it."

It wasn't until she moved to Fort Bragg that she was able to connect with a group of survivors. She remembers crying the first time they met because she had finally found people who could relate to her experience. "We didn't have to talk," she said. "I just knew they knew some of the same things I was feeling and experiencing."

About six months later, she began to volunteer in what was called the Gold Star Program.

Slowly the wheels began to turn for what would become the Army's Survivor Outreach Services. "In an [Army Family Action Plan] conference the whole idea of SOS came up. Survivors needed support," she said.

Gen. George Casey, Jr., then Chief of Staff of the Army, formed a survivor advisory board early in 2007. As the effort progressed, additional survivors were invited to participate.

Five survivors from Fort Bragg, including Kim, were able to contribute and, with their input, the Army began to lay the groundwork for SOS.

"Kim had always been very involved all the way up through their career," said Donna Engeman, a member of the survivor advisory board who now works for SOS. "She was able to bring all that experience and all of that wisdom as a survivor into what we were trying to develop."

"There wasn't consistency throughout the Army," said Kim. "Some people were having good [Casualty Assistance Officers], some people were having good [Casualty Assistance Center] support and others weren't. The chasm between the two was so great and people were complaining about so many different things. The knowledge

was out there and we needed to make this right and make this cohesive for all our survivors. We owed them that.”

From those humble beginnings, Survivor Outreach Services emerged three years ago and began assisting Families with financial matters, insurance and wills, and emotional support. In a release published through Army.mil, Lt. Gen. Rick Lynch, commanding general of the Installation Management Command, said more than 24,000 cases have been referred to SOS since its inception.

According to Kim, simply having someone to turn to for answers has a huge impact on survivors.

“For me as a survivor, I thought I would scream if one more person told me to go look something up on the Internet,” said Kim. “I wanted somebody to make it easy, because that’s all I could handle at the time.”

Now Kim sees groups like Survivor Outreach Services and Family Readiness Groups as valuable assets to Army survivors.

Although she no longer directly works for SOS, Kim unofficially coordinates with 45 survivors in her area to encourage them to use services available through SOS.

“The way that she has reached out to other spouses in her community – she’s just really become a mentor,” said Engeman. “Just as she was a mentor as a senior Army spouse, she’s now a mentor as a survivor.”

For those who want to avoid the assistance of SOS, Kim said, “I respect that, but I think it’s going to be a hard journey. I think there’s a bit of something for every survivor through SOS.”

The most significant, she said, is remaining connected to people and updated information.

“You’re not alone,” she said. “That’s the main thing. You’re not alone.”

*Link to high-resolution photos:*

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/familymwr/sets/72157627365110396/>