

Life & Arts

Gold star mothers share the high price of war



women's voices

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During Memorial Day weekend, Betty Jackowiak of Angola will attend several events honoring all veterans of our country who died in wars as well as during peacetime. But on Monday she will visit Holy Cross Cemetery in Lackawanna to visit the grave of one veteran in particular, her son, Lance Cpl. Rick Jackowiak, who gave his life in Vietnam in 1967. Women like Betty who have lost a son or daughter while serving our country, are known as Gold Star Mothers.

I had never given serious thought to the mothers of our country's fallen until 12 years ago when, unexpectedly, I found myself at an event seated next to Lillian Schulte, a soft-spoken lady from Tonawanda. She mentioned she had lost her son, Lance Cpl. Mark Vanderheid, in Vietnam in 1968. I was lost for words and overcome with compassion for her. It struck a nerve since I remember growing up during the Vietnam War. Having two sons of my own, I shuddered at such a loss and wondered how Lillian found strength to rebuild her life. Our brief discussion ended, but she sparked my interest to know if mothers like her ever had a voice in our country's history. What would they tell me if I could locate them? Were they recognized for their loss?

I searched in libraries and inquired at bookstores, but there was nothing written about Gold Star Mothers. I realized there were no books on the subject because no one had ever asked. There was a chapter of American history missing, and it was the personal price paid by women who lost sons in an unpopular war.

Many Americans are unfamiliar with the term Gold Star Mother; the topic is seldom discussed. After a few phone calls and explaining my interest in writing about these women, I met local Gold Star Mother Shirley Popoff, whose son, Cpl. Curtis Crawford, died in Vietnam in 1967. Shirley invited me to her home where we talked for hours. I'd finally found the missing chapter of our country's history. Without realizing it, she became the guiding compass on my journey. She introduced me to members of American Gold Star Mothers Chapter 26 in South Buffalo and explained my interest in writing about their experiences. Three members volunteered. I knew I was on to something. I wrote a chapter on each mother. My journey took me to New Jersey, Indiana, Florida and the Navajo Indian Reservation in Arizona. Mothers warmly greeted me, and their memories poured out. Many expressed faith in a higher power to overcome their devastating loss. By joining the AGSM organization, many have volunteered hundreds, even thousands, of hours at veterans hospitals, supporting veterans' events and helping veterans in need. Through volunteering, they continue to honor their sons, keeping their memory alive every day of the year.

Shirley and I remained close friends until she died last year. I feel privileged to have known her and fortunate to have met Gold Star Mothers like her with incredible strength and character. They've shown how we can learn, grow and still give back despite life's enormous disappointments. Sixteen stories, gathered in a manuscript, should hopefully be completed this summer titled, "Our Sons, Our Heroes."

Our involvement in wars comes at a price. We see it in the final resting places of our nation's heroes. It's on faces of veterans marching or assisting their comrades in wheelchairs in parades. Many bear emotional and physical scars. We'll hear the sacrifice as the nine-gun salute shatters the silence, followed by the bugle's haunting melody of taps.

At 11 a.m. on Monday, I'll honor the fallen by attending a ceremony at the Vietnam memorial near the Buffalo & Erie County Naval and Military Park sponsored by Chapter 77, Vietnam Veterans. I'll also honor Gold Star Mothers like Betty, Lillian and Shirley. If you attend any event on Monday, chances are Gold Star Mothers will be present. They'll tell you about the high price of war – the missing chapter of our country that was never told before – about our sons, our heroes.

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2. Cook of the month: 'I've got stuff, and I've got people'

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