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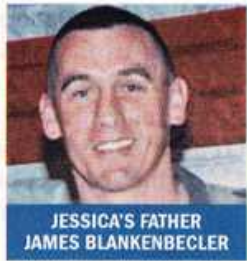
"No one my age really understood what I was going through," says Jessica Blankenbecler (right, with Leeza Weibley and Rohan Osbourne).



LEEZA'S STEPFATHER
MICHAEL BATTLES




ROHAN'S MOTHER
PAMELA OSBOURNE



JESSICA'S FATHER
JAMES BLANKENBECLER

WHEN W



At one Texas high school, six kids have had a parent die in Iraq. Now, through shared grief, anger—and pride—three of these young casualties of war draw strength and comfort from each other

Fifteen-year-old Jessica Blankenbecler fights back tears as she recalls Sept. 10, 2003, the day her father, Army Command Sgt. Major James D. Blankenbecler left for Iraq. “He told me to take care of Mom,” she says. “He promised he’d come back, and he said he loves me, loves me, loves me.” Twenty-one days later, on Oct. 1, 2003, Jessica and her mother, Linnie, went shopping for care-package items to mail James—Gatorade, coffee, creamer, gym shorts and his favorite candy fireballs. But when they got home, “there were three Army guys in dress-green uniforms standing in our yard,” Jessica says. Blankenbecler, 40, had died in an insurgent ambush in Samarra. “I just dropped to the ground and started crying and crying,” says Jessica. “They had to carry me inside.”

Jessica was the first student at Shoemaker High School in Killeen, Texas, to lose a parent in the war. By now five more students at Shoemaker have lost a parent in Iraq, and scores of others have had mothers or fathers come home with catastrophic injuries. So far at least 1,000 children nationwide have lost parents in Iraq, according to Scripps Howard News Service, which tallied the numbers. And schools like Shoemaker—two miles from Fort Hood, the nation’s largest Army post—carry a particularly heavy burden. Of its 2,000 students, a remarkable 80 percent have a parent at war. Teachers too have spouses fighting overseas. Sometimes the tensions spill over. “If news of attacks in Iraq goes up, it puts students even more on edge,” says head guidance counselor Barbara Critchfield. “When we get word of a Shoemaker parent getting killed in Iraq, you’ve got 1,500 students wondering, ‘Well, is my parent next?’”

Mostly, though, the kids share a special understanding. Now a sophomore, Jessica had moved from Georgia to Texas two months before her father died, scant time to make friends. But as the funeral procession passed the school, more than 1,000 students lined the street, holding American flags. “When the limousines and hearse appeared they stood still and so silent you could hear the tires humming on the pavement,” Critchfield says. Schoolmates sent Jessica condolence letters and gift bags. Touched by those gestures, Jessica resolved to be the “go-to” girl for grieving kids, offering friendship and the lessons of her experience. “When news cir-

WAR TAKES A PARENT

Hi Daddy:

Sorry I haven't written to you in a while. I miss you so much—just being here for me to hold your hand and you calling me “princess.” I keep going in your office to see all your things and your awards that you have gotten over the years. You accomplished so much. I like to go into your closet, too, and just touch and smell all your clothes . . . it gives me so many memories.

I have your military ring on right now. It's kind of big for my little finger, but it makes me feel you're holding my hand when I have it on. It's been on since we found out the news. I have your driver's license with me, too, so I can just look at you whenever I want. You have a little smile this time. When we went to get them done I asked you to just smile this time and you did just for me.

Everything reminds me of you. When we pass by Chili's I remember you sitting across from me eating your favorite salad. You always told the waiter to take off the little white crunchy things because you hated them. And when we drive by billboards that say “An Army of One,” it makes me remember you in your military uniform. How you always made a crunching sound when you walked, and how you shined your big boots every night before you went to bed.

One thing that I regret is when you wanted to open my car door for me, but I always got it myself. And when you wanted to hold my hand, I sometimes would pull away because I didn't want people to see me holding my daddy's hand. I feel so ashamed that I cared what people thought of me. But now I would give anything just to feel the warmth of your hand holding mine.

I can't believe this has happened to my daddy. It feels so unreal. Why did they have to kill you? Why couldn't they know how loved you are here? Why couldn't they know if they killed you I would not have a daddy to walk me down the aisle when I get married?

You always told me and mom you never wanted to die in a stupid way like a car accident. And you really didn't die in a stupid way. You died in the most honorable way a man like you could. I love you so much, Daddy. Only you and I know this. Words can't even begin to show how much. I will miss you, Daddy, with all of my heart. I will always be your little girl and I will never forget that....

—An excerpt from Jessica Blankenbecler's letter to her father, James, written in October 2003, after he was killed in Iraq

“If I could say just one more thing to him,” says Jessica (with her father in 1993), “it would be: ‘Please wait for me in heaven!’”



father—he died.” Critchfield was there. “Leeza cried out,” she says, “collapsed into my arms, fell to the floor and pulled me with her.”

“I think my dad was there with me that night,” Leeza says. “I kept closing the door to my room, and it just kept opening again by itself. I believe in all that stuff, you know?” She and Battles, who married Leeza's mother, Luz, 39, in 2000, had been exceptionally close. “If I came home from a hard day at school, he was always there to tell me jokes,” she says. Returning to class the first time after his death was hard, she says: “People look at you and they know what happened. Everybody wants to ask questions.”

Jessica knew that all too well and sought Leeza

culates of a parent who has been killed, she says, “Now, who is this student? Tell me what they look like and where they are,” says Critchfield. “The grief comes in stages,” Jessica explains. “I can tell them what to expect.”

She has formed an ad hoc support group with the two remaining students who have lost parents (the other three have left the school): Leeza Weibley, 17,

and Rohan Osbourne Jr., 14. “Knowing them helps a lot because I feel like I'm not the only one going through this,” says the reserved Weibley. Last Oct. 28 her stepfather, Sgt. First Class Michael Battles, 38, was killed by an insurgent's bomb in Baghdad. “I was at the school library, and they called me to the attendance office,” Leeza, a junior, remembers. “I saw my aunt. She said, ‘Your

out after Battles's funeral. They hit it off immediately and now speak often—about their dads, but also about their weekends, boys, cell phones, all manner of teen talk. “It's easier to talk to Jessica about stuff,” Leeza says. “We talk about a lot of the good things, and it stops you from thinking about what happened. I know I'll cry, but at the end I'll laugh.”

Her mother is "very grateful" that Leeza has a friend to share her feelings with. Jessica's mother, Linnie, feels the same. She and Jessica have had their battles since her husband's death. "She has a lot of anger right now," says Linnie. "When she comes home from school, she'll go straight to her room and shut the door." But Linnie herself found strength and solace in an Army widow's support group, and she hopes Jessica will find the same. "No one outside of our group can really understand what we're going through, and that's why I want this friendship for the kids."

The girls have both reached out to Rohan Osbourne, a bright, soft-spoken freshman partial to English, algebra and hoops. His mother, Sgt. Pamela Osbourne, 38, died on Oct. 11, 2004, when rocket fire struck her camp in Baghdad. Like the others, Rohan often shifts tenses when speaking of his fallen parent. "She has a nice smile, she's caring, giving and loving," he says. "I spent a lot of time with her, because my dad [Rohan Sr., 36, an auto mechanic] worked late sometimes. We'd talk or play tic-tac-toe. Little things. She

would quiz me on my spelling. Sometimes we'd go outside and look at the clouds and talk about their shapes. Sometimes we'd play basketball. Once in a while, I'd let her win."

While in Iraq, Pamela called and e-mailed daily. Then one day two sol-

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—Leeza Weibley, on her friendship with Jessica Blankenbecler

diers came to Rohan's house at 5 a.m., and he knew. "I went to school the next day because I felt like it was something my mother would want," he says. After he told a teacher he "might have a bad day, because my mom was killed yesterday in Iraq," Critchfield called his father and drove Rohan home; the Army sent a casualty assistance officer to counsel them. The family's stoicism might seem remarkable, says Critchfield, "but you have to understand the code of the Army: When things get tough, you keep going. That's the message Rohan's mother instilled very strongly."

For Rohan, soldiering on had limits. "I cried for one day straight," he says, as tears again stain his cheeks. "I was angry. I kept saying, 'She didn't deserve this.' But after that I told myself I had to be strong for my dad." Supportive friends and teachers at Shoemaker made that easier. "Getting to know Leeza and Jessica is helpful," Rohan adds. "We know how it is."

When the trio gets together for pizza one night, the conversation centers on school: Jessica impersonates a disliked

teacher; Leeza gripes about the spring prom—she can't bring her boyfriend, a college freshman; Rohan listens quietly, but laughs readily. And of course, talk turns to their dead parents: Jessica admits she "can't ever" go back to the Olive Garden restaurant, scene of her last meal with her dad. Leeza, on the other hand, loves to eat at Applebee's, a favorite family haunt, "because I remember my dad laughing and telling jokes." Progress is halting. "I think about my mom every day, but it's getting a little easier to bear," Rohan says. "I wear her dog tags and a copper bracelet she was wearing when she died. Sometimes I feel she's still with me."

By Richard Jerome. Anne Lang in Killeen and Kevin Brass in Austin



"We understand each other better than any other kid would," says Rohan.