

Well I have to say I feel a little like a traitor being here this morning, because my boys are both North Central grads. They were both soccer players too, and, well, soccer against U High never went that well. At least not on our side of the field. I'm pretty sure my son Jake did score against you once though, so there is that. ☺

But, we're here to recognize Veterans today, and anywhere you do that is the perfect right place.

As Stacy said, my name is Keirsten. And though I've never served in the military, I've been a military wife since I was 19 years old. And when my son Jake was 19, he joined the Marine Corps and I became a military mom.

I wasn't surprised by that. Jake was born into a military family, and in true military kid fashion, by the time he was four years old we had moved six times and he had his own passport.

He was in 5th grade and we were stationed in North Carolina when the World Trade Center was attacked on September 11, 2001. He was profoundly impacted by the events of that day, as were so many of us. And though he didn't immediately come home and say he was going to join the military, it was one of his strongest first glimpses of evil in the world, **and** it was also one of his first most powerful examples of a nation coming together in ways that it really hadn't for a pretty long time. That's something he never forgot, and definitely influenced his decision to enlist later on.

I think of that often. Especially when I spend time in Stacy and Deb's 5th grade classes. Last week the students were writing appreciation letters to Veterans. I got to talking to one of the boys who reminded me a lot of my Jake at that age. Blond and blue-eyed, a crew cut, and the same strong, healthy look about him. He showed me the letter he was working on, and then he looked at me and said, "I could never sign up for something like that. Something where I might die? I'm just not that brave."

Well my breath caught and my eyes teared up and I thought a lot of things in that moment, but mostly what I thought was, *what honesty*. ...And what bravery there is in that. And I told him so.

And I **also** told him, that's why our military is so special. That's why those who serve are so worthy of our respect and thanks. But not because they sign up for something knowing they might have to give their life, but because they sign up for something **believing** that we have freedoms worthy of being protected. That we have an American flag that stands for rights worth fighting for.

As we talked, I asked him about the things he's most thankful for in his own life. He's **10**, ☺ so the answers were things like his family and friends, video games,

hamburgers, cotton candy and puppy dogs. Exactly as it should be, right?! I told him I hoped he'd write those things in his letter to the veterans. That he would really personalize his thanks and let the veterans who read his letter know that what they do matters to him, and this is why.

For some of you, those things you're thankful for might be more like whatever color you got to dye your hair this week, or that perfect saying on the shirt you're wearing, or the fact that you can apply to a college of your choice, that you can travel, vote, start a business, attend church where you want to, write or gather for or against whatever your strongest beliefs are, and *choose* whether or not you want to enlist in the military, and also be vocal about that choice.

Those are all rights and privileges we get to enjoy, because we have a strong military filled with people who raise their hands to serve and stand up and fight for us to maintain those rights and privileges.

I know you guys have been collecting items for Treats 2 Troops which is awesome! And I think today you'll get to write letters to include in the boxes. So just like I told Stacy's 5th grader, I really hope you'll think about those things you're most thankful for, no matter how big or how small, and include that in your letters, or in your thanks to a veteran this Sunday on Veterans Day. Or any day.

Because it's those who serve in the military, and the families who stand beside them, who protect our right to do that.

And the fact is, no matter how many amazing treats we send or give or stuff into those boxes; the greatest beef jerky or the best granola bar in the world, what those service members are going to remember down the line is not what kind of treats were in that box, *but that the box came*. That there were letters inside that said someone cared. Someone was thankful for their choice to serve. They will remember that they were appreciated, and a total stranger took the time to tell them so.

Don't get me wrong, my son Jake and most every other deployed service member loves getting treats from home, and that's important. But it's the knowledge that people like Laura Papetti care enough to start a program like Treats 2 Troops, that communities come together and donate an incredible array of items just for them, that teachers like this take the time to tell their classes why it matters, and kids take time to write letters and tell them thank you. THOSE are the parts they're going to remember most.

When my son Jake deployed to Afghanistan, I sent him care packages all the time. In the beginning it was a comfy pillow and sheets, a flashlight and his favorite pens.

Later it was Sunday comics, a new Sudoku book, and Green Bluff apples I may or may not have smuggled in. ☺ Other friends and family members sent things too, and he appreciated all of it.

But a Treats 2 Troops box was probably one of the last things my son received in Afghanistan, and as a mom, I can't tell you how much it means to me to know that he got to be the recipient of so many people's kindness and caring. That he felt the appreciation and support of his community, and that he heard from someone besides me *that what he was doing mattered*.

I can't stop thinking about what that 5th grade boy said this past week. I don't know that many of our veterans would say they signed up so they could die for our country, but I guarantee all of them knew the possible consequences, *and they raised their hands anyway*. Because freedom is worth fighting for, and the bravery comes as we grow into those beliefs. I know that 5th grader will come to understand that, just as my son Jake began to learn that with the events of 9/11.

Just like most all of our Veterans, Jake enlisted to serve; to put action to his belief that our flag and freedoms matter, and it's up to some of us to preserve that, and all of us to respect that. They enlist for each one of us to live out our own beliefs, whether or not they agree or align with their own. What an amazing gift that is for all of us as Americans.

And that 5th grade boy is right. Sometimes the price of that service is higher than anything our hearts should ever have to bear. My son Jake didn't sign up thinking that's what would happen ...but he didn't come home from that deployment. Jake died in Afghanistan on January 1st, 2014, and I miss him every moment of every day. But he was a Marine, serving his country by his own choice, and he did it exceptionally well. For that, and for ALL who serve, I will always be profoundly grateful, and forever proud of my son.

Because not everyone is called to that, to wear the title of *Veteran*. Only 1 in 10 these days. A very special few. But **all** of us are called to something, and I would just encourage you to find whatever that is. Like Robert Browning said, "reach for the thing that's beyond your grasp." I think there is where you find your own brave. And when you do, please don't forget that it's our service members past and present, who give us those uniquely American freedoms to pursue whatever it is we decide to reach for.

To all of our Veterans ...*thank you*. Thank you for letting us reach.