

## **Gone But Not Forgotten: Family Members Continue the Service of Their Soldiers**

*By Antonietta Rico, Directorate of Prevention, Resilience and Readiness*

At 18 years old, Candice Griemel became a widow. She had graduated high school early, gotten hitched to her high school sweetheart and embarked on the life of an Army spouse, moving from the warm Texas climate to a new adventure in snowy Alaska. About a year after arriving at their new home, her husband, Spc. Jarrett Griemel, deployed to Afghanistan. While he was deployed she took a job working at a parcel-delivery company on base, but three months into his deployment she was sent to pick up a package from the main office of the Post Exchange. Two Soldiers in uniform waited there for her.

“After they gave me the notice, I was like ... *This can’t be true. This isn’t happening*,” Griemel said.

In one day, the teenager was plunged into trying to understand the circumstances of her husband’s death, which she was informed was in a noncombat incident, trying to understand Army policies, and trying to navigate the casualty assistance and survivor process—all while coping with her grief and living thousands of miles from her Family.

“I was lost, to be honest,” Griemel said. “The time that I’m learning to be an adult, learning how to be on my own and learning what my future held, I was then having to reconfigure what I had thought the next 60 years of my life was going to be.”

But 16 years after her husband’s death, Griemel’s new life has taken firm shape: She is now a fierce advocate for other Army survivors.

Initially, Griemel’s husband’s death was determined as not in the line of duty, and it took her about five years to appeal and get that decision reversed, which is what set her on the path of advocacy. After his death was changed to “In Line of Duty,” his unit put his photo on their unit memorial wall. Seeing her husband’s service remembered by his unit validated the years she spent navigating the process, Griemel said.

“I wasn’t spinning my wheels ... I had purpose. I had a meaning,” Griemel said. “I felt at that point that that’s where I needed to help others.”

Griemel became a [Survivor Outreach Services](#) coordinator for the Army, a job she did for 10 years. [SOS coordinators](#) provide lifetime support to surviving Family members. They help Family members with everything from relocation to understanding Army benefits to organizing survivor support events.

“Me being with SOS for 10 years was actually a healing point for me. ... Helping someone else helped me through my grief,” Griemel said.

After leaving her role as a coordinator, Griemel joined the Survivor Advisory Working Group, an advisory board that serves as a direct line of communication from survivors to the Chief of Staff of the Army.

The SAWG is made up of nine members who serve three-year terms. They represent a wide range of the survivor experience and include parents, spouses and sometimes adult children of National

Guard or Army Reserve Soldiers who died on active duty, including those who were killed in combat, as well as those who died from injury or illness.

“SAWG members are actively involved in the survivor community, locally or nationally, and elevate the concerns of survivors to Army Senior Leaders to resolve issues survivors may be facing,” said Joey Miranda, the program manager of the Army’s Survivor Outreach Services and the SAWG.

“They are the ambassadors and the voice for the survivor community,” Miranda said.

Some [SAWG](#) accomplishments include obtaining 24-month stabilization for survivor Soldiers; developing the Casualty Assistance Officer app, available on mobile app stores, which provides CAOs with contacts and references to help them help surviving Family members; and establishing the [online survivors benefit reports](#) interactive tool, which helps survivors understand changes in Army benefits, depending on their children’s age or other life milestones.

SAWG members meet monthly, as well as annually in Washington, D.C., where they are hosted by the CSA. They also meet locally with SOS coordinators, attend SOS events and help train casualty notification and assistance officers.

The most recent SAWG annual meeting was in April, and along with Griemel, Jennifer Keeling, another SAWG member, also shared with senior leaders her journey as a survivor. Keeling first met her husband, 1st Sgt. Ronald Keeling, in high school, during a river rafting trip with their youth group. They reconnected while she was in college when she started writing him letters and sending care packages after she found out he was deployed during Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm. They got married when he returned, and had two sons. Keeling supported her husband through his Army career and two back-to-back deployments to Iraq. They were coming up on their 17th wedding anniversary when her husband died by suicide.

At that time, she not only lost her husband, and her sons their dad, but her Family also lost their Army support system. She had been the co-lead of the unit’s Family Readiness Group but was asked to leave after her husband’s death.

“They were my support system as much as I was theirs,” Keeling said. “It was a difficult time to not only lose my spouse of 17 years but to lose the whole community that we had known for 17 years.”

After moving out of state to get a fresh start for herself and her sons, Keeling took a few years to process and heal, ensuring she and her sons received group and individual counseling. Then, she decided she was ready to help other survivor Families.

“I don’t want other Families to feel shunned from a suicide loss when that’s the furthest thing that they need,” Keeling said.

She has since worked at Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors with their suicide prevention and postvention team where she was able to talk to military units about the importance of caring for Families after suicide loss, and currently works for the Returning Veterans Project. She joined the SAWG because she wanted the opportunity to bring her personal experience—as well as her experience working with hundreds of military suicide-loss survivors—to the table that Army Senior Leaders would be sitting at.

“This is where change can happen, and this is where our voices will be heard by people who can actually make those changes,” Keeling said.

For Army survivors who are ready to be involved in advocacy, the Army is seeking new SAWG members for the 2026-2028 term. Nominations open in June and will be accepted until Aug. 31. Surviving Family members can contact their SOS coordinator to get more information on the nomination and application process. To identify your local SOS coordinator, visit the SOS coordinator locator web page at [www.armyresilience.army.mil/survivor-outreach-services/pages/survivor-outreach-coordinators.html](http://www.armyresilience.army.mil/survivor-outreach-services/pages/survivor-outreach-coordinators.html).

Surviving Family members can find additional helpful resources at the Army’s Survivor Outreach Services website, [www.armyresilience.army.mil/survivor-outreach-services/index.html](http://www.armyresilience.army.mil/survivor-outreach-services/index.html). Military OneSource also offers support to all military survivors, visit Support After Loss at [www.militaryonesource.mil/casualty-assistance/survivor-support/](http://www.militaryonesource.mil/casualty-assistance/survivor-support/).