

Raising a military family (without creating brats)

By VIRGINIA JUSTICE

“Where are you from?”

This is a complex question for someone like me: I was raised as a military brat, sometimes referred to as a career-dependent. My mother and father met while serving in the U.S. Army in Germany. They married and had my older brother and me before returning to the States. Though Mom fulfilled her commitment to the military and elected to leave the Army, Dad did not, so we became a military family. My dad was medically retired when I was 18, so I truly spent all my non-adult years in military life.

What exactly does it mean to be a military family? Certainly, it means you travel at the very least throughout the United States, and often the world. As a military brat I had the opportunity to visit and/or live in places some only dream of. I have been to every state in the Union including living in Alaska and Hawaii. My experiences with military family life were wonderful; however, not all share that experience. Moving every year or three means changing schools, leaving old friends, making new friends, and adjusting to a new location and new cultures, even within the United States.

Pendleton resident Jenifer Groves served in the U.S. Navy. She and her now ex-husband were both active duty Navy, raising their children during a time of peace. When that suddenly became wartime, things changed overnight for her military family. Immediate deployment with drastic work schedule changes also meant changes for their children. Fortunately in their case, family members were willing and able to step up and care for the



children while their parents served our country. Jenifer explains that there was also an upside. “Your kids understand what true sacrifice is, what it means to be a part of something more.”

Nita Westfall’s husband Steven, now retired from the Army, was deployed during military conflict. She recalls that dealing with deployments was an adjustment. First, explaining to the children that their dad is going to be far away and unable to come home to Pendleton for months. She kept things positive always, ensuring the children understood their dad had an important job to do helping others. She says one of the most challenging aspects of deployment was “doing all the things I was used to my husband doing.” When a spouse is deployed, often stationed at a military base/post far away from family, the remaining spouse becomes a single parent. It’s diffi-

cult, but Nita says, “This helped me become the strong, can-do person I am today.”

In the not too distant past, communicating with deployed or TDY (temporary duty station) parent(s) was not easy. The internet, though available, was not widely used in the civilian world, so it was letters and phone calls instead of Snapchat and Skype. Children not seeing their parent(s) in person for weeks, months, a year at a time is not easy; however, those lucky enough to remain at their parents’ duty post or base have others going through the same thing with them. The military typically provides support on the bases and posts for dependents and spouses of deployed service members. They provide community service offices staffed to assist families in relocating, securing housing and other issues that face military families.

Military posts and bases are like

small towns, except for fencing around the perimeter and guard posts that limit entry. Most have a commissary (grocery store), the exchange (shopping center), movie theaters, craft shops, parks, pools, athletic fields, etc. offering a variety of activities for youth and adults. Though living on base/post is not required, many families elect to live there because of all they offer. Quarters (housing) on base/post must be applied for and is not always available at the time of relocation.

The situation may be quite different for families of deployed reservists or National Guard, as they would not be living on a base/post; however, the military does aid through their Family Readiness Program. This program was designed to ensure families of deployed service members have the support necessary during a challenging time for both the service member and the family.

Though military life has advantages and disadvantages, dependents understand that their service member (and every service member) is part of something greater than themselves. It is often said that freedom is not free – this is quite true for those in the military and for the spouses and dependents left behind or moving away from family and friends. The nomadic military life is an experience this dependent would live again because I know that my dad’s service to our country made a difference in the lives of others.

Pendleton home economist Virginia Justice and her husband have two college-aged daughters.