

# 'The ultimate sacrifice'

*Gold Star families honored at seventh annual Veterans Summit*

By Dean Rhodes

*Smoke Signals editor*

Earning a gold star in school is usually a positive experience.

Earning a gold star as a military family definitely isn't.

Gold Star families are so designated because they have lost a family member – husband, wife, sibling or child – in battle.

The seventh annual Veterans Summit: Gathering of Warriors held at uyxat Powwow Grounds on Thursday and Friday, July 11-12, heard from two Gold Star parents who spoke about losing their sons in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Yakama Nation Veterans Affairs Program Manager Shawn Marceau (Blackfeet) described the heart-breaking events that occurred after his 22-year-old son's death.

Marine Corps Lance Cpl. Joe Michael Jackson's vehicle drove over an improvised explosive device during Operation Enduring Freedom in the Helmand province of Afghanistan on April 24, 2011.

Marceau said he went from being a Blue Star father (child in battle) to a Silver Star father (child wounded in battle) to a Gold Star father in the space of 20 minutes.

"It is the highest honor," Marceau tearfully said during the Veterans Summit on Friday morning. "Even a higher honor than my own service."

Marceau served in the Marine Corps from 1990 to '94 in Desert Storm and Somalia.

Marceau recalled how he gave his son a coin before he was deployed to Afghanistan, saying that as long as his son possessed the coin that his father and family would be with him.

"That coin was blessed by a lot of people," Marceau said.



Photos by Timothy J. Gonzalez

**Gold Star mother Shirley Schmunk hugs Veterans Affairs Western Regional Tribal Government Relations Specialist Terry Bentley after receiving a blanket after sharing her story on the death of her son, Jeremiah, on the second day of the Veterans Summit: Gathering of Warriors held at uyxat Powwow Grounds on Friday, July 12.**

However, those blessings did not prevent what all military parents dread: The knock on the door by two Marines wearing green dress uniforms to deliver the terrible news.

"The next 10 days were a total blur," Marceau recalled.

He said that he takes solace in knowing that his son's death occurred before Osama Bin Laden was killed in May 2011. "There was still a purpose when my son was killed. He was still hunting the bad guy who did such a terrible thing to our nation," he said. "All of this has changed my life. ... Gold Star families have made the ultimate sacrifice."

Marceau was joined by Shirley Schmunk, who lost her son Jeremi-

ah on July 9, 2004, during an ambush in Iraq while he was deployed with the Army National Guard out of Washington state.

After dealing with her grief, she formed Time of Remembrance, a nonprofit organization that helps other Gold Star parents deal with their emotions and loss. The organization has a Facebook page.

Both Marceau and Schmunk received standing ovations and hugs following their presentations.

The seventh annual event, first held in Grand Ronde in 2013, started Thursday afternoon with the Grand Ronde Honor Guard bringing in the colors. Tribal Council member Steve Bobb Sr. carried the U.S. flag, Al Miller the Oregon flag, Raymond Petite the eagle staff, Louis Rober the MIA/POW flag and Rich VanAtta the Grand Ronde flag.

Tribal Council Chairwoman Cheryle A. Kennedy, Tribal Council members Denise Harvey and Kathleen George and Secretary Jon A. George on drum accompanied 13 veterans on to the newly installed artificial turf at the powwow grounds. Tribal Council member Jack Giffen Jr. arrived shortly after the opening cer-

emony.

Navy veteran Nick Sixkiller (Cherokee) reprised his role as master of ceremonies, calling up Charles Tailfeathers (Blackfeet) with the Native Wellness Institute to talk about military trauma and reconnecting to healing.

Army Ranger John Courtney also spoke about his traumatic experiences while serving in Iraq and his arduous road to recovery when he returned to the Warm Springs Reservation.

Veteran Gil Calac (Paiute Mission) then shared his story of trauma following his return from the Vietnam War and encouraged attendees to develop some kind of faith to get themselves through the pain.

"After seven years of this summit, now it really makes sense to me to help another veteran heal," Tailfeathers said.

Shalene Joseph (A'aniih) and Josh Cocker (Tongan/Kiowa) from the Indigenous 20something Project then encouraged attendees to play several "getting to know you" games before they were offered the opportunity to participate in

**See SUMMIT  
continued on page 9**



**Gold Star father and Yakama Nation Veterans Affairs Program Manager Shawn Marceau wipes a tear while sharing the story about finding out about the death of his son, Marine Corps Lance Cpl. Joe Michael Jackson, during the second day of the Veterans Summit: Gathering of Warriors held at uyxat Powwow Grounds on Friday, July 12.**



**Veterans listen to stories from Gold Star family members about the loss of their sons on the second day of the Veterans Summit: Gathering of Warriors.**