

HOPE

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HOLIDAYS

When Christie Coombs had to face Christmas without her husband, she realized she wasn't alone. So she created the annual Military Family Holiday Gathering, where partygoers find love and support amid a celebration.

By Celia Shatzman

Photography by Margaret Lampert

Holidays are still the hardest time for Christie Coombs, 51, whose husband Jeff was on the American Airlines flight that crashed into the World Trade Center on 9/11. "That first Christmas without him was so difficult, but I'll never forget how much the smallest acts of kindness meant to our family," says Christie, "whether it was a letter from a stranger or our paperboy offering us his earnings for the week." Christie was so moved that she organized a yard sale and auction with her children—Matthew, now 23, Meaghan, 21, and Julia, 17—and friends in Abington, Massachusetts. They raised \$50,000 for the families of 9/11 victims who hadn't qualified for government assistance. "Originally I just wanted to inspire my kids to pay it forward, the way people had helped us," she says. "But then I decided to get everyone in our community involved."

Just two months after 9/11, the Jeffrey Coombs Foundation was born, providing financial assistance to Massachusetts families coping with illness, death or other challenging circumstances. "Most folks don't get the outpouring of support that we did, because when someone dies of a heart attack, people don't just start sending you checks," says Christie. The nonprofit also contributes to local projects, such as buying books for libraries and funding educational scholarships. In

HOW TO HELP

To get involved, make a donation or learn more, visit jeffcoombsfund.org.

LOCAL HERO

the 10 years since its founding, the group has raised more than \$450,000, mainly through the Jeffrey Coombs Memorial Road Race, Walk and Family Day in Abington. Held around the 9/11 anniversary—and September 18, Jeff's birthday—the 5K and family day draws about 2,000 participants annually.

But Christie felt she could still be doing more. “The year Jeff passed away, Christmas was incredibly emotional,” she remembers. “It was miserable, but we managed to eke out happiness and continue traditions. A couple of years later, Christmas was still pretty hard to do without Jeff, and I thought to myself, of course we weren't the only ones missing a loved one.” Her revelation inspired Christie to launch in 2006 the free Military Family Holiday Gathering for families in Massachusetts with someone deployed overseas, as well as families of injured or fallen soldiers who had served in Iraq or Afghanistan. There is even a special room for Gold Star families—a military term for relatives of soldiers who died in service. They're honored at a Remembrance Table, which features a candle and the name of each Massachusetts service person killed since 2001. “It's about letting the families know we appreciate the sacrifices they are making, and showing them people are thinking of them—and thanking them,” Christie says.

Between 300 and 400 people attend the annual party. Christie gets the word out by sending press releases to radio stations and newspapers, and notifying various military organizations. Fayth Henley, a mom of three from Hull, Massachusetts, learned about it from a volunteer at the Jeff Coombs Road Race who noticed Fayth's homemade T-shirts for the run—hers read “Army Wife” and her kids' said “Army Brat.” Fayth attended the party with her children—JD, 7; Sophie, 4; and Emily, 2—mother and mother-in-law while her husband, Jason, was in Afghanistan as an engineer for the Army Reserve. “We had the best night,” Fayth says. “JD still talks about it. He hung out

with other boys and won a bunch of raffles, including a football signed by NFL players, which is displayed in his room.”

In addition to a dinner buffet, there are crafts, interactive video games, face painting, clowns, caricature artists, and a visit from Santa, as well as massages and manicures for adults. Held at a hall in Foxborough, Massachusetts, and spread out over five ballrooms, there's also a dance floor with a DJ, live musical acts and free raffles. Last year Stanley Cup hockey champs the Boston Bruins hung out with the kids. “It's known as a can't-be-missed event,” Christie says. “I receive

e-mails from men and women in Afghanistan saying thank you for doing this for my family.”

Each group leaves with a Christmas ham, gifts for the kids and a family portrait—a second copy is mailed to the relative serving overseas. “It's a happy distraction that makes life a little more pleasant, if only for one evening,” Christie says. “The foundation has been my way of getting through my grief. I'm always looking for ways to help others and not wallow, because no matter what your situation is, people are dealing with worse.”



→ The Coombs family: Matthew, 23; Christie, Meaghan, 21; and Julia, 17.



Christie makes the festivities serve an educational purpose. One room has a vendor area, where approximately 20 organizations set up information tables for veterans and families. It's also a way to bring the families—who come from all over New England—together so they can swap contact information and bond. “They realize the value in having that connection with one another, because a non-military family doesn't understand

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the sacrifice or pressures they face when someone is deployed and not around on a regular basis,” Christie says. This was true for Fayth, who was celebrating the holidays without her husband for the first time. “This isn't a big military area so I can't always relate to other families—I didn't know anyone else in the same situation,” says Fayth. “But here I could vent about being a single mom and my husband being overseas. Everybody just totally opens up to you about their circumstances and you know you're not the only one going through it. My mother-in-law loved it because she has four sons in the military and she liked talking to

all of the other mothers like her.”

The majority of the services and entertainment for the holiday gathering are donated, and the rest are heavily discounted. Even the gifts for children are contributed by a mix of corporate sponsors like Hasbro, while schools and church youth groups host gift card drives for the older kids. GKI Bethlehem Lighting gives its overstock for the annual Christmas tree and decoration

sale, which serves as the primary fundraiser for the holiday party, in addition to grants and private donations.

Christie treats her work with the Jeffrey Coombs Foundation as a full-time job, though she doesn't receive a salary. (She's a freelance writer.) It's truly a team effort. “I can't do this without my myriad of volunteers, who really do so much of the work,” Christie says. The road race committee consists of a dozen of her friends, and about 100 volunteers regularly pitch in, including local students and several 9/11 family members. Christie's kids also help with the race, as well as with organizing the holiday event. Plus, they host fundraisers at their



→ Clockwise from left: Kids Braden Cooney, Madison Smith and Faith Ryan watch the Jeffrey Coombs Memorial Road Race; Christie addresses the crowd; a runner shows off his number.

schools that benefit the Jeffrey Coombs Foundation. For five years Meaghan ran a “Summer's End” teen music festival—it showcased local bands and raised over \$20,000. “I decided to start the Summer's End festival because I wanted to contribute to the foundation in my own unique way,” says Meaghan, who is a senior at Roger Williams University in Rhode Island. “We didn't have any events specifically for a younger crowd, and since my father and I shared a love for music, I thought it would be a cool event. What's most rewarding for me is knowing that we've made someone's life a little bit better.”

On party night, it's all hands on deck—Jeff's family man the registration table while Christie, her kids and their friends work the event alongside dozens of other volunteers. “This isn't my foundation,” Christie says. “It's a family foundation and our way of remembering Jeff. My goal is for us to keep doing this for a long time, and when I'm too old to do it I hope our kids will continue to keep it alive.” ●