Q&A with Mrs. Mary Jo Myers

Mary Jo Myers is a founding member of ThanksUSA’s Advisory Council. She is an educator with an extensive background in public service as a champion for military, education, and humanitarian causes. She has been a military spouse for more than 40 years, married to General Richard B. Myers, USAF (Ret), 15th Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Q: You’ve spent more than four decades helping military families. What are their biggest challenges?

The world situation today with our nation at war for longer than any other time in our history brings different challenges and stresses to our military and their families than those incurred during WWII.

I’m certainly not saying that the WWII deployments that lasted until surrender were easier than today, but the disruptions to family life caused by the “churn” of multiple deployments bring issues of readjustments to family dynamics and perhaps reassignments to new locales. It is especially difficult for children to adjust to these ongoing changes in their lives and the uncertainty they experience when a parent is deployed.

Q: How best can Americans say “thank you” to our service men and women, their spouses, and their children?

Americans can best show their thanks by helping to integrate service families into their communities by offering jobs to spouses and veterans, showing appreciation for their service, and being inclusive in community organizations. And, of course, help with scholarships for education is a life-changing way of saying “thanks”! Yes, sacrifices are made by all family members when one serves in the military, but they don’t want anyone to feel sorry for them. They’re proud of volunteering to serve their country, and there’s no better way to thank them and honor that service than with a welcoming hand.

Q: You’ve been a ThanksUSA Advisory Council member almost since the launch of the charity more than 10 years ago. What attracted you to ThanksUSA?

I first met the Okun family when they were exploring what they might do to support military families after getting to know the Ward family in their neighborhood. Rachel and Kelsi Okun, only 8 and 10 at the time, were interested in education and wanted that to be their focus. Other organizations were giving scholarships, but no other organization had that as their primary purpose.

I was impressed and attracted by the genuine commitment and compassion of this family who had no direct connection to the military. I appreciated that their parents helped facilitate this effort, but followed the girls’ initiative. And their success and tenacity have gone beyond what any of us might have hoped for 10 years ago!
Q: What inspired you to focus on the educational paths of the children and spouses of our military?

My background was in education, and I’ve taught English in secondary schools as well as to non-English speakers both in the U.S. and abroad. I believe that learning is a lifetime pursuit, and my grandchildren know that I don’t pass up many teachable moments! Education opens doors to new opportunities, but it also becomes a path of necessity. With many injured service men and women undergoing months and years of recovery from injuries sustained in battle, the spouse may become the primary wage earner in the family.

Education can be the key to supporting a family as well as a more fulfilling future.

Q: Tell us about raising your own family—two daughters and a son—as a military spouse who traveled around the world with her Air Force husband. How did it work for both of you as parents?

Military families incur challenges from frequent moves, but that also helps bind the family into a stronger unit, more dependent on each other. My children became best friends following a move—until they made new friends at school. As most every military spouse knows, you often have to act as a single parent. With toddlers testing patience or teenagers testing boundaries, it’s a challenge! With family members usually far away, other military spouses become your support system. Those wearing the uniform count on each other in life and death situations, and those bonds carry over to family members.
On a personal note, my oldest child went to four high schools, and the youngest went to three. In an essay or college application, they wrote about the resilience and flexibility they developed. Often the easiest way for a child to be accepted in a new community is through sports, music, or a special interest.

Q: You’ve also been involved with a number of humanitarian organizations, including one you co-founded—the Aschiana Foundation—which helps street kids in Afghanistan. Tell us about what causes most inspire you to action.

I first traveled to Afghanistan in 2002 and part of my agenda was to visit Aschiana, a grassroots organization that was helping Afghan children who had to work on the streets part of their day picking up trash, shining shoes, selling small trinkets, etc. to help support their families. They worked half a day and could attend school half the day and receive a hot meal at Aschiana, which means “nest” in Dari. We had brought some basic school supplies to give them, and they were in disbelief that they had a whole tablet or box of crayons of their own. They warmly expressed their thanks, but one little boy came up to me, looking up with big brown eyes, and said “Please don’t forget us.”

It haunts me still today as I fear much of the world is forgetting and taking their eyes off Afghanistan.

These children have such a hunger for education, and in their lives where so little is dependable, education is a gift that can’t be taken away. It can be what separates a child trapped in a cycle of poverty and violence to one with a chance at a better future.

Q: Gen. Myers, your husband, became chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff one month after the World Trade Center attacks of September 11, 2001, helping to shape the War on Terror. How would you describe those years?

The past decade has given me some distance from the intensity of those years, but I remember the responsibility and the incredible honor we felt we had to represent the men and women in uniform and their families. We were awed by their dedication, resolve, bravery and commitment to their country. It was a very intense, often stressful and uncertain time, but being united in the same cause helped us to keep each other strong. We each had our own agenda, but we were focused on the same things: ensuring support for our military families during war time and representing our military abroad to the best of our ability.

I used the word “intense” before, and I think this anecdote explains that: By the time my husband would get to breakfast in the morning, there would be a couple notebooks on the table to prepare him for the day. At night, he would be doing paperwork if we weren’t entertaining a foreign visitor or attending an event. I found the best way to get his undivided attention to discuss anything or seek his opinion was to have my list of questions ready during his morning shower. He was a captive audience!

Q: General Myers retired from the military in 2005. Do you have thoughts of retiring too?

Sometimes we feel as if we are busier than before! But I’ve assured my husband that’s not possible. We don’t have all the wonderful staff that facilitated the schedule, and we don’t have the singular focus as when he was
on active duty. The pace of life was so fast, and when it came to travel, staff did about everything for us except take the required immunizations!

We are both making efforts to slow down our outside activities and have more time with our quickly growing grandchildren who live nearby—ages 7–13. Resigning from something is unfamiliar as a move always cleared the calendar before. We enjoy lake sports and golf, but leisure activities will always be accompanied by meaningful opportunities to stay connected with our military families and find ways to be involved in community service.

Q: Between our 1975 defeat in South-east Asia and the spectacular victories over Iraq in 1991, the U.S. military was nowhere near as popular as it has been in recent years. As a young Air Force wife and mother during that period, what kind of environment did you encounter then compared to now?

It is most heartening to see the support and appreciation that the uniformed military and their families receive around the country—from generous corporations that support organizations like ThanksUSA, to community businesses that donate as well as provide employment to military spouses and veterans, to individual citizens who help our military and families in their churches or neighborhoods.

The post Viet Nam days were another world. My husband was told to change out of his military uniform to avoid harassment when returning from overseas and going to a civilian airport. For a short period between moves in 1971, I was working at Kansas State University during enrollment and tried to avoid any conversation about what my husband did—not out of a lack of pride, but out of a desire to avoid awkward conversations or unpleasant exchanges.

Things are very different now, and we are blessed to live in a country where the military comes out at the top of respected professions.

—Mary Jo Myers