Appreciation through Education

Like millions of our nation’s families, our military community has been hit hard by the pandemic that has robbed too many Americans of not only loved ones, but also their livelihoods and educational opportunities. ThanksUSA scholarships introduce hope into the difficult circumstances in which students and their families find themselves.

Before the pandemic, a majority of military families were reporting stress due to financial insecurities, and the unemployment rate for spouses actively seeking work was at 24 percent. These issues have been compounded along with the uncertainties that remain for students of higher education. (See results from a recent scholar survey on the next page.)

The critical work we do creates brighter futures for military families who often put their dreams on hold while supporting their service member. Families are the backbone of military strength and sacrifice, and our national security depends on them. Let’s honor these heroes with something that will last—an education.

Q&A: A Public Service Giant

Secretary Leon Panetta began his long and distinguished public service career in 1964 as a First Lieutenant in the United States Army. He later served in the U.S. House of Representatives, as the President’s Chief of Staff, Director of the CIA, and U.S. Secretary of Defense, among others.

In 1997, Secretary Panetta joined with his wife Sylvia to establish The Panetta Institute for Public Policy. Reflecting Secretary Panetta’s own ideals, the nonpartisan, not-for-profit study center seeks to attract thoughtful men and women to lives of public service and prepare them for the policy challenges of the future.

How did your military service prepare you for the many leadership roles you have since filled?

I’m the son of Italian immigrants who came to this country like millions of others in the early 30s. Because of the opportunity that this country gave them, my parents always stressed it was important to get involved in public service and give back.

I served for two years in the military as an intelligence officer. Those were the days of the draft. There were men from all over the country, of every creed, every belief and every race. I saw how all of them could come together in a common mission, and that gave me tremendous inspiration in terms of duty to country.

How do you see education working as an equalizing force for good in the U.S.?

I was the first in my family to go to college. I believe that the key to enjoy equal opportunity is education. I also think education is critical to whether or not our democracy can survive. I am a believer in the importance of education as the great equalizer in terms of giving everybody the chance to enjoy the American Dream.

Tell us about the role of your family during your years of public service.

I used to fly on a red eye, work in Congress all week, and fly back home on Friday night. My wife was my chief of staff in the District, on a volunteer basis. We had three young kids and they were all involved in athletics. And she made sure I went to every game they had on Saturdays. It was on my schedule, and my wife made sure of that. Sunday, I’d try to reserve for the family, and then I’d jump on a plane to go back to Washington. It was a punishing schedule.

“As anyone in the military knows, you cannot do it without the support of your family and the love of your family.”

Secretary Panetta spoke with supporters during a ThanksUSA Military Family Gala reception via Zoom.
“The scholarship from ThanksUSA meant the world to me and my family. This contribution has led to me graduating with honors, forging great connections that will last for years to come, and fully achieving my potential.” – Kenna, Army child

Save the Date: Visit ThanksUSA.org/golf to learn more about golf tournaments supporting ThanksUSA in Nashville (7/19/21) and Tampa (9/20/21).

Can you expand on the long and short term risks to military families in regards to the lasting effects of COVID-19.

We know that this pandemic is striking every part of the country. Millions are out of work, including military family members who were already experiencing high unemployment rates.

This is a national emergency. If our men and women are willing to put their lives on the line, there's every reason to look to their families and say we owe them something special because of the sacrifices they are making. We wouldn't be able to protect our national security were it not for the support of these military families. It's time we recognize that we owe them at least the opportunity to be able to get a job and a good education.

Where do you feel you made the most impact and why?

I thought it was important to always set goals, no matter what job I was in. Probably the most satisfying experience I had was the mission to go after Osama bin Laden. We were able at the CIA to locate bin Laden and we worked with Admiral Bill McRaven to put together a strategy for how we would go after that compound. We came up with two teams of Seals going in on helicopter 150 miles into Pakistan at night. They breached the wall and went in and completed the mission. I couldn't have been prouder of both the intelligence people and the military Seals who accomplished that mission.

CHANDLER
2020-21 Scholar

Chandler was awarded the 2020 Helping Hand Educational Fund / ThanksUSA scholarship to reach his goal of becoming a Certified Public Accountant.

Chandler’s father, a decorated Army Veteran who served tours in Kosovo, Kuwait, Bosnia and Iraq, passed away when Chandler was 12 years old. Still mourning his death, Chandler received frightening cancer and diabetes diagnoses. “My father—my rock, my hero, was gone, and I suddenly felt that I was no longer the director of my own life. I had to give over the reins to others to survive.”

Next May, Chandler will complete an Associate of Arts degree with an Accounting concentration. He will continue his education at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs. His ultimate goal is to establish his own accounting firm.

Although Chandler will still face challenges, financing his education will not be one of them. Chandler’s scholarship will cover up to $34,000 of educational expenses over the next three years.

COVID-19 Effects on Military Families and Education

ThanksUSA has been tracking the effects of the pandemic on our scholars and their families, and we are beginning to see the long-term implications around higher education and career development. In our most recent survey, 77 percent of scholar respondents reported that the pandemic has negatively impacted career development/advancement opportunities, with a majority noting that their internship, work study, or other job opportunities have been affected (59%) and also a lack of access to extracurricular activities, clubs and networking (57%). Top concerns for their families included mental health issues and loss of work/income (both 52%).

Secretary Leon Panetta as keynote speaker during ThanksUSA’s virtual Military Family Gala in October

“In the military there’s a saying that you leave no one behind, and I think it’s time for us to say the same for military families.”
“Thank you so much for this opportunity and caring about me and my kids, to help us get through the next phase of life. It’s the kindness of complete strangers, with such big hearts, that makes me feel so good inside.” - Cortney, Gold Star Navy spouse

FALL 2020

Military Service Inspired by Tennis Corps

Who would have thought playing tennis with military veterans would lead a young athlete to the United States Naval Academy? Junior tennis player Ananth Gunupati is heading in that direction, inspired in part by wounded warriors as part of the ThanksUSA program Tennis Corps. Once a week, junior tennis players are paired with disabled veterans to share their skills and learn from each other at the Junior Tennis Champions Center (JTCC) in College Park, Maryland (pictured above).

For Gunupati, the experience has been an eye-opener. “I have learned from the vets’ stories and what they have been through,” he says. “When I am with the veterans, I get a boost of confidence and am immediately made aware that anything can be achieved with the right mindset.” And now, this high school senior and second-generation American is setting his sights on becoming the first member of his family to serve in uniform as a naval scholar.

It will be months before Gunupati knows if he has been accepted to the Naval Academy. In the meantime, he will continue his studies, grow as an athlete and attend Tennis Corps each week. And the veterans will continue to encourage and cheer for his success.

Read the full article in the Nov/Dec issue of Racquet Sports Industry magazine. Learn more about Tennis Corps, our partnership with the USTA, and how to bring the program to your community at TennisCorps.org.

ThanksUSA National Spokesperson Frances Tiafoe

In September, Tiafoe advanced to the fourth round of the 2020 US Open for the first time, making him the last American man competing in the tournament. He’s been successful in European tournaments since, taking the top prize at an ATP Challenger in Parma, Italy, and making it to the semi-final of the Astana Open. Tiafoe has made headlines by using his platform for good and continues to mentor players coming up behind him.

“Allie of West Deptford, New Jersey, was awarded the 2020 ThanksUSA scholarship in Memory of PFC Jamie Riley, a 21-year-old Soldier killed in a Stryker vehicle accident during a training exercise in 2019.

With the assistance of this $3,000 scholarship, Allie is beginning her collegiate journey at Penn State. She intends to major in Biology with the goal of pursuing a career in medical research.

Diagnosed with the autoimmune disease Juvenile Idiopathic Arthritis (JIA), Allie has become an advocate for the Arthritis Foundation. She leads team All in for Allie at the Walk for the Cure and the Jingle Bell Run and has appeared on NBC10 Philadelphia.

Allie’s father is a disabled Veteran whose 30-year career included service in both the U.S. Navy and the U.S. Army. “My dad’s injuries further inspire me to go into the field of Biology and Medical Research. He is one of the most inspiring people I have ever had the chance to know.”

“Thank you for supporting our military families. Because of you, their lives are brighter.”

ALLIE

2020-21 Scholar

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1) Sheila Casey and Deb Mullen introduce ThanksUSA scholars Harris, Kiana, Kevin and Jennifer during a virtual roundtable discussion; 2) Gala emcee and military spouse Brianna Keilar of CNN welcomes the audience from her home; 3) ThanksUSA Co-founders Rachel and Kelsi Okun reflect on how the organization got its start around their dinner table 15 years ago; 4) ThanksUSA scholar Madi, whose family was featured as the 2020 ‘Family of Honor’ is pictured with musical performer Hunter Hayes during a virtual meet and greet; 5) Danny and Jackie Garcia are presented with a Lifetime Achievement Award for their work with Global Walk Corporation

“The fact that people think about the families [of our military] as well, that’s something that I think is super special.” –Scholar Madi Clark

To watch the virtual Gala program, visit www.MilitaryFamilyGala.org.

Scholarship Program Highlights

4,860 scholarships awarded for a total value of $15,918,047

Our scholarship recipients come from each of the 50 states and DC and represent all military branches

www.ThanksUSA.org