ThanksUSA

About ThanksUSA

ThanksUSA is a 501(c)(3) organization that provides need-based educational scholarships and pathways to meaningful employment for children and spouses of military personnel, with special emphasis given to those who lost a loved one in service to America.

We do this because America’s troops and their families deserve our respect and our thanks for their selfless service. Members of the United States Armed Forces have borne significant burdens to protect this country, and we can’t let their contributions be forgotten.

Scholarship Program Highlights

ThanksUSA’s scholarship program is unique in that both spouses and children of military men and women can apply to the same organization for support.

- Since ThanksUSA’s inception in 2006, we have awarded 4,500 scholarships valued at more than $14 million.
- Our scholarship recipients represent all military branches and come from each of the 50 states and the District of Columbia.

Pathways to a Brighter Future

With more than 2,400 scholarship applications processed this past summer, we continue to be amazed by our growing community. To meet the evolving needs of our scholars, we launched the Pathways for Patriots program to help bridge the gap between higher education and meaningful employment. In collaboration with our corporate partners, we act as a catalyst for career development opportunities that reveal military family members’ unique skillsets while alleviating their common challenges.

Responsible Stewardship and Operational Expertise

Supporters of ThanksUSA can be confident that their funds will be used effectively and only for the intended purpose of the scholarship program. Our fiscal responsibility, financial transparency, strong governance, and average expense ratio of only 10 percent serve as an excellent measurement of integrity, financial health, and operational stability. Ninety percent of your contribution will support the scholarship program.

Worth Remembering

With the ongoing engagement of the U.S. military in so many parts of the world, there remains a need for educational and career opportunities that will enable service members’ families to live fulfilling and productive lives. And, as they flourish, our neighborhoods and cities also benefit.

“It touches my heart that ThanksUSA recognizes the families of the men and women who serve our nation.”

– Army dependent Sinead Bolton
The Helping Hand Scholarship Fund was established as a bequest of Carl and Patricia Pignoli in 2018. ThanksUSA will award the renewable Helping Hand Scholarship to the spouse or child of a disabled or fallen military member. Scholarship recipients must begin their post high school education at a community college and may receive up to $38,000 if they wish to continue to obtain a four-year Bachelor's Degree.

Sevon Chambers is the first recipient of the Helping Hand Educational Fund/ThanksUSA scholarship to begin undergraduate studies at Rose State College in Oklahoma. The son of a disabled Army veteran, Sevon majors in Pre-Physical Therapy with the ultimate goal of becoming a physical therapist.

Sevon and his parents LaQuinta and Sebastian attended ThanksUSA’s Pathways for Patriots Gala in Washington, DC, this past September. The family was able to spend time with Carl and Patricia Pignoli, the generous sponsors of Sevon’s award, and even joined each other on stage during the event.

"Receiving this scholarship has taken away a tremendous burden for me and my family," said Sevon. "The Pignolis have made me a member of their own family with not only their financial support, but their inspiring devotion to helping military families."

www.ThanksUSA.org/HelpingHand
Our American military families make great sacrifices in the shadow of a military career. With modest pay, they share the same dreams that we all have—to provide their families with a better life through educational and career opportunities. For many military families this dream has become more daunting with the ever-increasing cost of education and high rate of military spouse unemployment.

Figures from the College Board show that college tuition costs and fees continue to rise each year with the average four-year private institution costing more than $32,000, and the average four-year public college nearing $10,000. The low to moderate average household income of our scholarship applicants leaves these families with limited options.

ThanksUSA’s scholarship program provides life-changing opportunities for the spouses and children of our troops who require financial assistance towards higher education, while increasing the chances for success in their personal and professional lives. Please honor and thank our military families with the gift of education through support of ThanksUSA’s scholarship program.

Scholarship Eligibility

Applicants for a ThanksUSA scholarship are evaluated and chosen based on the following criteria:

- Spouse or dependent of an active-duty service member (including Guard and Reserve members)
- Academic record – minimum GPA of 2.0
- Intent to enroll in an accredited two- or four-year college, university, vocational or technical school
- Spouses may attend part time (six-credit minimum), and may use the award for non-degree certification or licensing programs
- Demonstrated financial need
- Demonstrated leadership and participation in school and community activities
- Preference given to spouses and children of the wounded and fallen

ThanksUSA defines “active duty” as uniformed service for at least 180 days since September 11, 2001, including those wounded and killed in action. “U.S. military personnel” refers to the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, and Coast Guard. Military reservists who have been activated to full-time duty, and members of the National Guard who have been federalized and who otherwise meet the requirements, are also eligible.

Determining Compelling Financial Need

When determining “financial need,” ThanksUSA considers the number of children in a family, the number of family members going to college, amount of savings, medical costs, and other components. Our contract with Scholarship America helps ensure applicants’ privacy and enables us to screen applicants so as to deliver a good match between donor intent and recipient value.

ThanksUSA’s scholarship program is unique in that both spouses and children of active-duty men and women can apply to the same organization for support. ThanksUSA is one of the most ambitious scholarship programs available to military spouses, and provides meaningful supplemental support for their children who fall through the cracks of other governmental programs as evidenced by the high number of need-based applications we receive annually.

We are honored as an organization to have issued a significant portion of our scholarships to low-income and minority households. After a dozen years of our program, we have seen how ThanksUSA scholarships change the earning potential of the families who receive them. Through our Pathways for Patriots program, scholars now have increased opportunities for career development with our corporate partners.

For 2019, our goal is to award 500 scholarships valued at $3,000 each and to engage with 25 new corporations through the Pathways for Patriots program. With help from donors, our recipients will make strides toward achieving their educational and career aspirations.
Army dependent Caehlen Roberts was awarded a $3,000 Heartland 4 Heroes/ThanksUSA scholarship to begin undergraduate studies at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas.

Majoring in English, Caehlen is already a published poet who completed 26 college credits during her final two years of high school. She now hopes to earn teaching certification and become a high school English teacher.

On May 7, 2008, Caehlen’s father, Army Staff Sgt. Kevin C. Roberts, was killed by a roadside bomb in Afghanistan’s Sabari District. He was one of the first casualties of Fort Campbell’s 101st Airborne Division’s Fourth Brigade Combat Team to die in Afghanistan.

Caehlen is the second member of her family to receive a Heartland 4 Heroes/ThanksUSA scholarship. In 2013, Caehlen’s mother, Donnice, was awarded a $3,000 scholarship for her own undergraduate studies at Stephen F. Austin State University.

“Thank you everyone for donating to the Heartland 4 Heroes/ThanksUSA scholarship. I am able to have a chance for my dream career because of this scholarship. It means the world to me!”
Military Families Face Unique Education Challenges

Army Father, Daughter Inspire Path for Change

November 26, 2018 | By Col. Lanier Ward (ret.)

Above my kitchen counter proudly hangs my daughter Allie’s white-framed certificate of military “retirement.” Allie was 18 years old when she received the memento last May after harassing me unmercifully to have a retirement ceremony following my own 30 years of Army service. I had hoped to simply fade away as the old military retirement song goes but Allie quickly pointed out that the event wasn’t “MY” ceremony but rather “OURs” representing the sacrifices that both of us had made through the years.

The certificate recognized Allie as having lived a U.S. Army BRAT lifestyle (Born, Raised, and Trained) knowing nothing but the military her entire life. After 13 different homes and 11 different schools before turning 18, while simultaneously supporting me on multiple deployments, Allie was a fully certified Army BRAT. The certificate declared she was now “free to pursue the life of her choosing while always remembering the service and sacrifice by our Soldiers and their Families to keep our Nation and its ideals safe.”

Allie’s lifestyle wasn’t unique. Her BRAT peers were also all too accustomed to summers without vacation in lieu of the next duty station move. Birthdays and holidays weren’t associated with specific dates, but with training or deployment calendars. Friends came and went, and any feeling of continuity usually indicated the calm before the storm of the next move.

In 2003, I was injured while deployed with the 2d Armored Cavalry Regiment in one of the first insurgent attacks in eastern Baghdad. An improvised explosive device ripped through my patrol, nearly detaching my right arm and leaving my left foot shattered. Three other Soldiers and my interpreter were injured. We were lucky. A fellow soldier made the ultimate sacrifice that night. Allie and her mom received a call that I was coming home but not in the condition they imagined.

Without warning, their lives and priorities completely changed as they cared for me during a recovery that included 22 surgeries with moves between two hospitals. Allie assisted my transition from a barely functional right-dominant hand to a full-time “lefty” by sitting in my lap as we worked countless hours in her coloring books. To strengthen my right leg as my reconstructed left foot healed, she staged races in our cul-de-sac on her Barbie bike against me in my wheelchair. It is no surprise she intends to become a physical therapist.

My daughter became my hero through those trying times.
Heroism is one of the benefits I believe the military lifestyle offered her as she was surrounded daily by these young incredible military service members. She was exposed to individuals who made great sacrifices and typically only desired two things...a simple “Thanks” and hope for a bright future for their families.

That bright future today is often predicated on one simple requirement, a good education. Although many military children become experts on resiliency and change and experience worldwide travel, they can often be challenged by formal education because they so frequently change teachers and schools. When it comes to higher education cost becomes critical. According to a recent survey by Blue Star Families, compared to civilians military families are 20% less likely to have two incomes; on average, enlisted service members earn less than $46,000 annually (plus allowances) over a 20 year career; spousal unemployment is two to three times the average for civilian spouses and over 35 percent of military spouses consider themselves underemployed.

Anything that helps family members, who sacrificed so much, to achieve their educational goals is a godsend.

Twelve years ago I became the unwitting inspiration for two young neighbor girls, Rachel and Kelsi Okun, just eight and 10 years old, who committed themselves to do something for military families because of the sacrifices of mine.

In 2006, they founded what is today, ThanksUSA, a non-profit organization that has awarded 4,500 scholarships valued at more than $14 million to military spouses and children. Allie and I couldn't be prouder of that legacy.

ThanksUSA is about heart. It is about the heart of two young girls who simply wanted to say ‘Thanks’—and did so by giving back to service members and their families who want to achieve their own goals in life.

November is Veterans and Military Families Month. For Allie and me, it is a very special and personal commemoration. For all of us, it should be a time to consider a way to say “Thanks” to those who have sacrificed so much.

The author, Col. Lanier Ward, is retired from the U.S. Army. Among his numerous military awards are the Army Distinguished Distinguished Medal and the Purple Heart. He serves on the ThanksUSA Board of Directors.
Voices: Military families deserve more than lip service

Gen. James L. Jones Jr. and Sheila Casey, Special for USA TODAY

July 6, 2016

“Support Our Troops.” The phrase has become a staple on the campaign trail, during halftime of major sporting events and on the bumper of vehicles across America. But what does this seemingly compulsory token of support really mean for our brave men and women serving in the armed forces today?

On Independence Day on Monday, many acknowledged the sacrifices of those who serve and expressed gratitude to the men and women in uniform who protect our rights and liberties. Yet, with so many of our military forces stationed overseas, a widening disconnect between the protectors and the protected has slowly developed. And few are aware of the hardships faced not just by the members of our military abroad in harm’s way—but by their families back home.

Since the global War on Terrorism began nearly 15 years ago, corporations, non-profits and everyday citizens have looked for ways to help service members and veterans address their most pressing needs. This “sea of goodwill” has achieved some results. With improved programs in place for help service members make the transition to civilian life, veteran unemployment at an all-time low, and more readily available resources for wounded warriors, the time is right to direct our collective efforts toward filling the gaps that adversely affect military families.

The demands on military families are real and discernible. Frequent relocations and long separations make it difficult for a vast majority of military spouses to

101st Airborne Troops Return To Fort Campbell From Afghanistan

( Photo: Luke Sharrett, Getty Images)
pursue their career aspirations and present unique challenges for military kids who hop from school to school. Not to mention constant concern for loved ones who are deployed. Three out of four active duty spouses report being a military spouse has hindered their ability to find jobs, and more than half are not employed.

Unlike their civilian counterparts, many military families rely on one income, putting significant strain on their finances. It also often makes the path to higher education much more difficult. With 700,000 military spouses; 560,000 service members claiming 1.1 million children as dependents; and more than 100,000 military children ages 17 to 22 in active duty households across the country — college affordability has become one of the greatest burdens facing military families.

Even so, it is an issue that has gone largely unnoticed by organizations and individuals looking for tangible ways to thank these hidden heroes for their service.

While the post-9/11 G.I. Bill has supported many veterans, service members, and dependents, it simply isn’t enough for hundreds of thousands of military families serving on active duty with multiple children and only one source of income.

A decade ago, two young girls found a way to repay the sacrifices that military families have made on our behalf. Seeing their classmate’s father return from Iraq with severe injuries, they sat around the kitchen table with their parents and close friends and created ThanksUSA, a national non-profit dedicated to providing post-secondary school scholarships to children and spouses of those serving on active duty, with preference given to families of the fallen and wounded warriors. Since 2006, over 3,700 military family members in all 50 states and D.C. have received college and vocational scholarships.

Still, hundreds of thousands of other military families need help in closing the financial gap for education and deserve a variety of other support as they set out to re-establish their roots and contribute to their communities for years to come.

Let’s not only acknowledge the profound sacrifices that military families make in service to our nation, but also recognize that supporting military families is vital to sustaining the All-Volunteer Force and a strong national defense. At a time when service members and their families will continue to be asked to do more with less, what more can we do? Helping them pursue a college education and a better future should be at the top of the list.

*Jones is president and CEO of Jones Group International and a former national security adviser. He has served on ThanksUSA’s Board of Directors. Casey is chief operating officer of The Hill and the wife of Gen. George Casey Jr., former chief of staff of the U.S. Army. She serves on ThanksUSA’s Advisory Council.*