

Pastor launches support network for other military families_122004

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By George Henson

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BROADDUS—Aaron Barth always has had his dream firmly in sight. From his earliest days, his mother and father can remember Aaron and his brother, William, playing army with sticks they found in the yard.

Aaron joined the U.S. Army on his 18th birthday, and now he is in Iraq doing what he always wanted to do—serving his country. And William, 21, is training for deployment to Afghanistan.

They are living their dream, but that doesn't make it any easier on their parents.

Their father, Wayne Barth, is pastor of First Baptist Church in Broadbus. But a strong faith doesn't make him immune from fear.

Wayne Barth, pastor of First Baptist Church in Broadus, and his wife, Diana, want to offer not only prayer support for other military families, but also a network to help them communicate with each other.

“There are moments when I get worried and afraid-fearful more than anything,” Barth said.

There also are moments when tears roll down his cheeks. While being a pastor does not insulate Barth from the worries and pain of fatherhood, he does find solace in God's word and his overarching faith that both he and his son are firmly in God's hand.

“God has really been gracious in lifting me out of my gloom and despair,” he says, his unforced smile adding to the veracity of his testimony.

Each day, sometimes several times a day, Barth looks to Scripture for

comfort. More often than not, he turns to the passage he highlighted in bright yellow the day he was told Aaron would be going to Iraq—2 Samuel 22, particularly the first seven verses.

King David's song of praise found there is often just the balm Barth needs to soothe his frayed emotions.

“Knowing that God hears me when I get afraid, fearful and emotional makes all the difference,” he said.

He and his wife, Diana, also have found support in their church, especially from more than a dozen veterans in the membership. Those men also spoke to their sons about what to expect in combat.

Broadus, population 218, and nearby Zavalla, where Mrs. Barth teaches kindergarten, also have been supportive. The bank, various restaurants and the school have Aaron's picture on the wall.

“We've had the support of God, church, the community, our family. I don't know how we would make it without all the support,” Barth said.

One particularly trying day, Barth even sent an e-mail to President Bush.

“I know he probably didn't get it, but I had to send it. It simply said: 'Dear President, Please take care of my son.'”

He said he and his wife don't hide their concerns from their children still living at home—Sarah, 17, and Bryant, 15.

“They know we hurt, and they hurt right along with us. They get angry. We don't hide our feelings from one another,” Barth said.

While Mrs. Barth also shares her husband's concerns for her sons, she also finds comfort that Aaron in particular is living his dream. She says some people tell her they don't see how she can cope.

“It could be difficult, and some days it is, but this is what he loves to do. How many kids know at 19 or 20 what it is that they want to do and are actually getting to do it?” she pointed out.

That doesn't mean she didn't steer him away from a military career path. Aaron was salutatorian of his 2002 graduating class, and his mother wanted him to go to college. She filled out applications for universities and scholarships, but he was steadfast in his desire to serve his country.

His intellectual skills led the Army to try to steer him toward work with computers, but he requested a combat role instead.

“One of the hardest things is day to day not knowing what is going on-not knowing what he is doing,” Barth said.

He said his sons knew exactly what they were signing up for. While they had military aspirations from a young age, he said the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on Sept. 11, 2001, angered them and solidified their resolve to serve their country.

Barth recalls telling them that they were enlisting during a time of conflict and that “it was possible they might be called on to make the ultimate sacrifice.”

“As a parent, you want to say, 'Are you out of your mind?' But we've raised them the best we knew how, and they're grown. You just have to let them go and support and respect their decisions,” he said.

Aaron left for Iraq days after Thanksgiving with the 3rd Infantry Division. William has been issued his desert fatigues and expects to deploy to Afghanistan within months with the 82nd Airborne.

“They were both here for Thanksgiving and came to church in their uniforms. I don't think my chest could have swelled any more,” their father

admitted.

Still, when he looked at the soldiers, he saw his boys.

“These are typical 19-, 20-, 21-year-old kids. They still like hanging out with their friends. They love to play video games. I don't want to give the impression that they are immature by any means, however. These are boys in a man's world, doing a man's job. These are real men; more men than their father will ever be,” he said.

Barth's personal struggles have inspired him to start a support group for soldiers' families throughout the state.

He said military bases have excellent support systems, but parents, spouses, grandparents and siblings living away from a base may feel like no one else can identify with their fears and struggles.

He hopes to form a telephone and e-mail support system. Military families can use it on days when they are struggling, allowing them to communicate with someone who knows exactly what they are feeling.

“I know there are a lot of people who are hurting out there. I want to offer them someone to turn to,” he said. “As families of military personnel, we have a common bond with these folks.”

He says he is making himself available out of obedience to God.

“You never know where God is going to bring support from. God has seen those times when we have personally been struggling and he's always prepared someone to be there for us,” Barth said.

“If there's anything I can do with what God has placed in my hands, that's what I want to do,” he added.

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