

Today's youths in military families shoulder the horrors of 9/11

By [Petula Dvorak](#)

Jaelen Gadson was a second-grader when he heard his mom on the phone about 5 a.m., crying.

He knew something was wrong. But he didn't know that the events unfolding thousands of miles from his family's home in Hawaii that Sept. 11 would change his life completely.

Like the 2 million other children whose parents serve in the military, Jaelen's childhood was shaped by war.

Deployments to Afghanistan, then Iraq. Saying goodbye to a father who left for war showing no fear. "Have a good day at school. I'll see you later," he'd tell his kids before leaving.

This was the final goodbye for thousands of kids who lost a parent to war. Jaelen got his dad back.

But when he saw his big, strong, Army linebacker father after his second deployment, he was at Walter Reed Army Medical Center.

There aren't too many 17-year-olds who can claim to have a "mom sense." But Jaelen, a football player at Mount Vernon High School in Fairfax County, can't look at a sidewalk without instantly assessing the rocks and dips, the ramps and the rolls that would make it a smooth ride for his dad's wheelchair.

His nurturing instincts were something foreign to him before, because for most of Jaelen's life, his father was this hulking, real-life action figure who played football at West Point, formed battalions of men and went off to war.

And then in 2007, somber men in uniform came to the Gadson home in Kansas and sat down in the living room. And his mother cried. And his sister cried. And Jaelen's life changed yet again.

He's part of a generation of military kids for whom wartime isn't the new normal. It's just normal. It's what they've grown up with. And the sacrifices they've had to make since Sept. 11 are just as sobering as those of their parents.

"Military families have shouldered the response for that horrible day," says Joyce Wessel Raezer, executive director of the National Military Family Association in Alexandria.

The association has a camp, Operation Purple, that it runs for military kids. And one of the most remarkable things they found when they partnered with RAND to study the effects of war on military children is the time it takes them to be kids again.

For days, they couldn't relax and make lanyards and roast marshmallows and sing because they were so worried about the households they'd left behind. Little grown-ups.

The halls of Mount Vernon High School are full of them. Twenty-eight percent of the school's students are military kids.

"Most of our students were young before 9/11, and now they're dealing with emotional stress that comes with being in the military after 9/11," said Toni Jones Newton, who has been a counselor since 2000 at Mount Vernon, which is close to Fort Belvoir. "There are emotional problems, depression, anxiety, things going on at home. If they have family members who are deployed, a lot of times they have to take care of their siblings. . . .

"And a lot of them don't want to talk about it. They just fit right in and go on," Jones Newton said.

They are resilient, mature, stoic.

Even so, the school is hoping to get a counselor specializing in military kids — their transfer credits, household burdens and emotional anxieties — with the help of a Defense Department grant.

No one understands the need more than Mount Vernon's principal, Nardos King, who is also a military daughter, wife and mother.

She has witnessed the way her students' lives have been disrupted by repeated deployments and sometimes devastated by the return of a gravely injured parent. She is a cheerleader for them, understanding the desire to go forward without fuss but knowing how hard that can be sometimes.

For a lot of military kids, it's just easier to talk to each other.

"Yeah. It's really hard to understand how that feels. We find each other, talk about what our dads are doing. How they're doing," said Jaelen, whose dad is at every one of his football and lacrosse games, cheering at all his wrestling matches.

Jaelen, his sister and their mom, who is also a West Point graduate, moved to the area in 2007, when Col. Greg Gadson was brought to Walter Reed after he was hit by a roadside bomb in Iraq. Jaelen left all his pals behind in Kansas to be by his father's bedside, watching his therapy, helping the nurses, offering support when his father learned that the doctors would have to amputate one leg, then the other.

"I can't say it was easy," Jaelen said. "He was always the strong one."

But Jaelen is strong, too. When he graduates from high school this spring, he already knows what he wants his next destination to be: West Point.

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