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Woman organizes local Blue Star Mothers chapter

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NORTONVILLE - There are joys and heartaches known only to mothers whose sons or daughters are active-duty military. That's why Pamela Coakley is starting a local chapter of Blue Star Mothers of America.

"It's been on my heart for a long time," she said.

An organizational meeting is set for 6:30 p.m. Tuesday at the American Legion Post 6 in Madisonville.

Coakley's son, William Patrick Rudd, was killed in Iraq in October. He was with the 75th Ranger Regiment, 3rd Ranger Battalion as it conducted a ground-assault raid that killed Abu Qaswarah, a high-ranking al-Qaida leader.

The support group is named for the blue stars in the center of the red and white service flags that military families display in their windows during wartime, a tradition that began in World War I. Each star represents a child in service.

The organization was first reported on the Congressional Record in February 1942 and officially chartered by Congress in 1960. It encourages patriotism, volunteerism, support for active-duty personnel and veterans' causes.

Mothers are the primary membership, but others may join as associate members.

"It's open to the public and all who have love and respect for our armed forces," Coakley said. "It's for anybody who wants to help the military."

Initially, Coakley was reluctant to join the Blue Star Mothers because of the secret nature of the operations of Patrick's regiment.

Her son told her not to worry.

"He said, 'Mama, if it's important to you, do it,'" Coakely recalled.

There are no active chapters in western Kentucky, but Coakley soon made connections with other mothers across the state and the nation through e-mail and phone conversations. She considered starting a chapter then, but it wasn't the right time in her life.

"Just being able to talk to other mothers going through the same thing as me helped," she said, even though she lived too far away from the other state chapters to get involved in service projects. "The mothers would ask prayers for each other and for their children. It made me very proud to be a Blue Star mom."

After Patrick died, those long-distance friendships soon became lifelines.

Coakley became a Gold Star Mother and met her "mentor," Lorene Friedman of Florence, the Blue to Gold liaison for the Blue Star Mothers of America.

The pair talked on the phone several times after Patrick's death and formed a friendship prior to their first face-to-face encounter, a private ceremony in Elizabethtown. There, Coakley was given a memorial book and a new service flag. A gold star covers the blue star, in recognition of her son's sacrifice.

Friedman, 70, isn't a Gold Star Mother. She's a "military daughter, military wife, military mother and military grandmother," she said in a telephone interview. She has two grandsons who are Marines and her deceased son was a veteran.

"I lived through the Vietnam era and got into Blue Stars because I swore we'd never go through another Vietnam era with our boys," she said.

She's been a Blue to Gold liaison since September, and has presented three Gold Star flag in person.

"That's three too many," she said.

The Blue Star and Gold Star organizations are sensitive to the mother's feelings, Friedman said, and will only provide the ceremony if the mother requests it, and when she is ready.

"When you meet a mother like this, that's one of the most terrible days of her life," she said.

Friedman believes the ceremony was a comfort to Coakley.

"She brought out pictures of Patrick and his military friends. When she talked about her son, her face would just glow," she said.

Coakley confided to Friedman that she wanted to start a Blue Star Mothers chapter.

"Pam is just one of these women that you talk to for a few minutes and you feel like you've known her all your life," she said. "She has a big heart. She lost her son, but

wants to continue to do for the boys fighting for country."

Friedman continued, "She took her time, she didn't rush into it. She called and said, 'OK, I'm ready. I want to get a chapter started.' ... I told her, 'Go girl, I'll help you any way I can.'"

Coakley has also enlisted the assistance of her lifelong friend, Marion Bourland of White Plains. Bourland's oldest son Jeramey served a year in Iraq with the Army. Another son, Austin, is a combat medic in the National Guard.

"Whatever she wants me to do, that's what I'll do," Bourland said. Mothers of servicemen and women "need to know they're not alone, that they have a voice and that their voice does matter."

Coakley said she knows the time is right for her to take on the task.

"I've just been waiting ... I had to be ready," she said. "This is my purpose. ... It's about patriotism, love of country, love of the troops. The soldiers need to know how much we support them."

Friedman said she knows Coakley will "do it proud."

"I know her hearts in the right place," she said.

Most of all, Coakley is doing it for Patrick.

"I know this would make my son proud to know I'm doing this," she said.

For more information about participating in the local Blue Star Mothers chapter, call Coakley at 339-3891 or e-mail pammyfaye007@yahoo.com

Information about Blue Star Mothers of America may be found on the Internet at www.bluestarmothers.org. Information about Gold Star Mothers of America may be found at www.goldstarmoms.com.

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