



Home Sweet Home Page

A Local Effort Has Become A National Meeting Place For Worried Families

When battle-hardened Marines return home from war and begin the transition back to civilian life, the adjustment can be difficult — for them and for their families and loved ones. Unfortunately, many returning veterans need medical, psychological or other assistance to make a successful transition. Some just need a friend or someone to talk to, whether in person or online.

Recognizing these needs, Tracy Della Vecchia founded one of the most successful military-oriented resources available. Online since early 2003, the Web site MarineParents.com, headquartered in Columbia, provides an array of support functions for all Marines — past, present and future — and their families.

"I'm A Marine Mom"

Della Vecchia gives visitors to the MarineParents.com Web site a succinct and understated greeting: "Welcome to MarineParents.com, my labor of love and sharing online. My name is Tracy Della Vecchia and I'm a Marine Mom."

She launched the MarineParents.com Web site and national organization from her Columbia home in early 2003, shortly after her 17-year-old son, Derrick, enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps out of Hickman High School. While Derrick was in training and during the first of his three combat tours in Iraq, Della Vecchia realized there were many mothers, fathers and other family members who experience the same angst and fear

that haunts many returning Marines. Not content to remain inactive, she created MarineParents.com as "a place to connect and share with one another during combat deployments."

Connecting And Sharing

Connecting and sharing via the various MarineParents.com Web pages and links, or in person at conferences, meetings and workshops, is highly therapeutic and restorative to those who take advantage, says Della Vecchia.

"I started the Web site because I couldn't find one place to find all the news," she says. "I wanted to learn about the Marine Corps, about the [then] recent deployments to Kuwait and Iraq."



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She also wanted to know if other Marine moms and dads were experiencing the same emotions and fears. Over the years, the Web site has become soothing, necessary and sometimes almost addictive to those who avail themselves of the vast amount of online information and support.

Connecting and sharing can, however, be overwhelming. During Operation Iraqi Freedom, the Web site was getting more than 12,000 visitors a day, most of whom remained connected for more than an hour. Today, MarineParents.com-related Web sites receive about 12 million hits each week, generating more than 10,000 outgoing electronic newsletters. In addition to national exposure on radio and television news programs on CBS, NBC, Fox, CNN and CNN International, MarineParents.com was featured in the *New York Times Magazine* and numerous newspapers and magazines throughout the world.

Chat Rooms

A major component of the Web site's "connecting and sharing" credo involves a sophisticated chat room setup.

"The chat room provides an opportunity to talk live, in real time, with other parents, spouses, family and friends of our Marines," according to the Web site. "The friendly atmosphere encourages conversation among friends; friends who understand the emotions you're experiencing during the uncertain times, whether it be boot camp, deployment to a combat zone, or just feeling bewildered by the new lifestyle of the Marine Corps."

The room is open six evenings a week, Sunday through Friday. Each chat night has a specific agenda related to supporting Marines and their families at home. Thousands of chat room participants spend countless hours consoling, encouraging, sympathizing and empathizing with others who have similar concerns, questions and motivations.

No Politics

A distinctive feature of MarineParents.com is the "no politics allowed" rule.

"We don't care about a person's political views," Della Vecchia says. "We carefully screen our postings and chats to facilitate constructive discourse and to ensure that we don't let politics get in the way of meaningful dialogue and our mission of supporting our Marines and their families."

The Next Battle: Coming Home

MarineParents.com helps thousands of returning Marines and their families confront and overcome many of the psychological, emotional and sometimes medical challenges that face them as they move back into the civilian world. These "warriors in transition" come back to a world whose inhabitants, in most cases, cannot comprehend the stress, and sometimes debilitating effects, of combat. Many faced death and witnessed destruction on a daily basis. Leaving their emotions and feelings behind on the battlefield is difficult and often requires assistance. MarineParents.com volunteers are there to help in any way they can.

One volunteer is Dr. Bridget Cantrell, a recognized expert in the identification and treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder. The Seattle-based psychologist not only counsels Marines returning from war, but also participates in monthly online discussion groups hosted by MarineParents.com.

"I tell all the thousands of troops I do my workshops for: PTSD is not a mental illness," Cantrell says. "It is [instead] a reaction to events that are outside of normal human behavior."

In addition to her prominent work on the MarineParents.com Web sites, Cantrell is a frequent speaker at the MarineParents.com annual conferences.

Wonder Woman

Della Vecchia admits it was never her intention to create a national organization when she put those first few pages online with questions and answers about deployments and other Marine Corps-related information. Today, the incorporated nonprofit organization has a nine-member volunteer board of directors, eight staff members, hundreds of volunteers and more than 26 Web sites serving the needs of about 90,000 Marine and Navy corpsmen families. Funding for MarineParents.com comes from donations, corporate sponsors, fundraising events and proceeds from the online sale of Marine Corps-oriented merchandise such as mugs, T-shirts and other items that proclaim the pride Marine families have for their Marines.

Della Vecchia works 12- to 15-hour days (and nights), travels extensively, engages in fundraising activities, meets with Marine Corps officials and Marine parents, handles correspondence, over-

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sees the budget, works with and guides hundreds of official and unofficial volunteers, and does most of the "Web work" and writing for the sites. She rarely takes a day off, but somehow she still finds the time and energy to maintain close ties with thousands of past and present MarineParents.com supporters who reach out to her for reassurance and advice.

She doesn't have all the answers, but she does provide meaningful and insightful support because she, too, has gone through the uncertainty, questioning and disillusionment that many others are trying to deal with and comprehend. She has been there. She knows what it is like to not know what is on the horizon for a loved one in a war zone; she knows about life after combat. Being able to share this knowledge and understanding with others through her low-key and positive approach is one of Della Vecchia's chief strengths.

Volunteer Support

Providing many avenues of support for Marines and their families is paramount to MarineParents.com volunteers. One example is the Care Package Project. Locally, about every six to eight weeks on Care Package Saturdays, more than 100 volunteers from around the country show up at the MarineParents.com offices and warehouse in southeast Columbia to sort, pack and ship more than 1,000 packages to deployed Marines and Navy corpsmen. These packages contain food, personal grooming items and other things to make life a little more comfortable for those who receive them. Volunteers in other cities have replicated the local care-package efforts.

The Unit Information Database is another Web service providing useful information on Marine Corps units located throughout the world. Links allow families to keep up with the whereabouts of their Marines. This database helps facilitate communication between anxious families and individual Marines and their units.

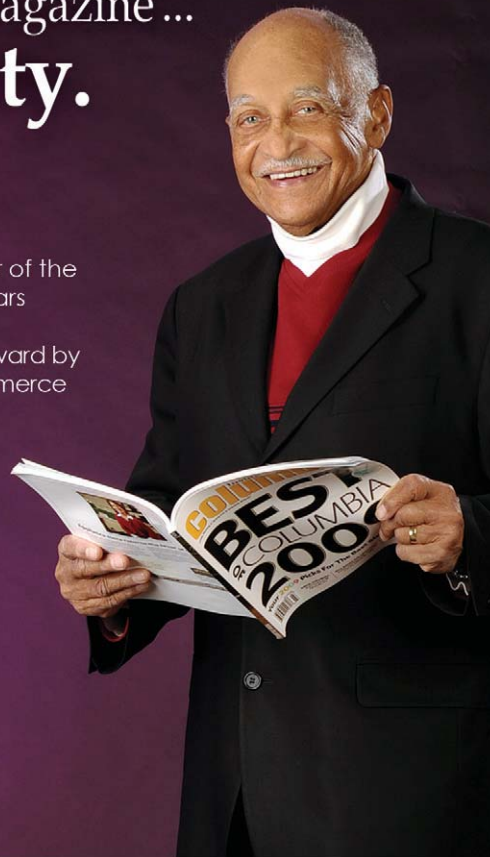
Two additional outreach programs support injured Marines.

"Through Operation Prayers and Letters we work with families to set up private mailing addresses by providing letters of support from church groups, schoolchildren and others who want to connect with our Marines," Della Vecchia says. "In addition to adding the Marines to their prayer lists, they also write cards

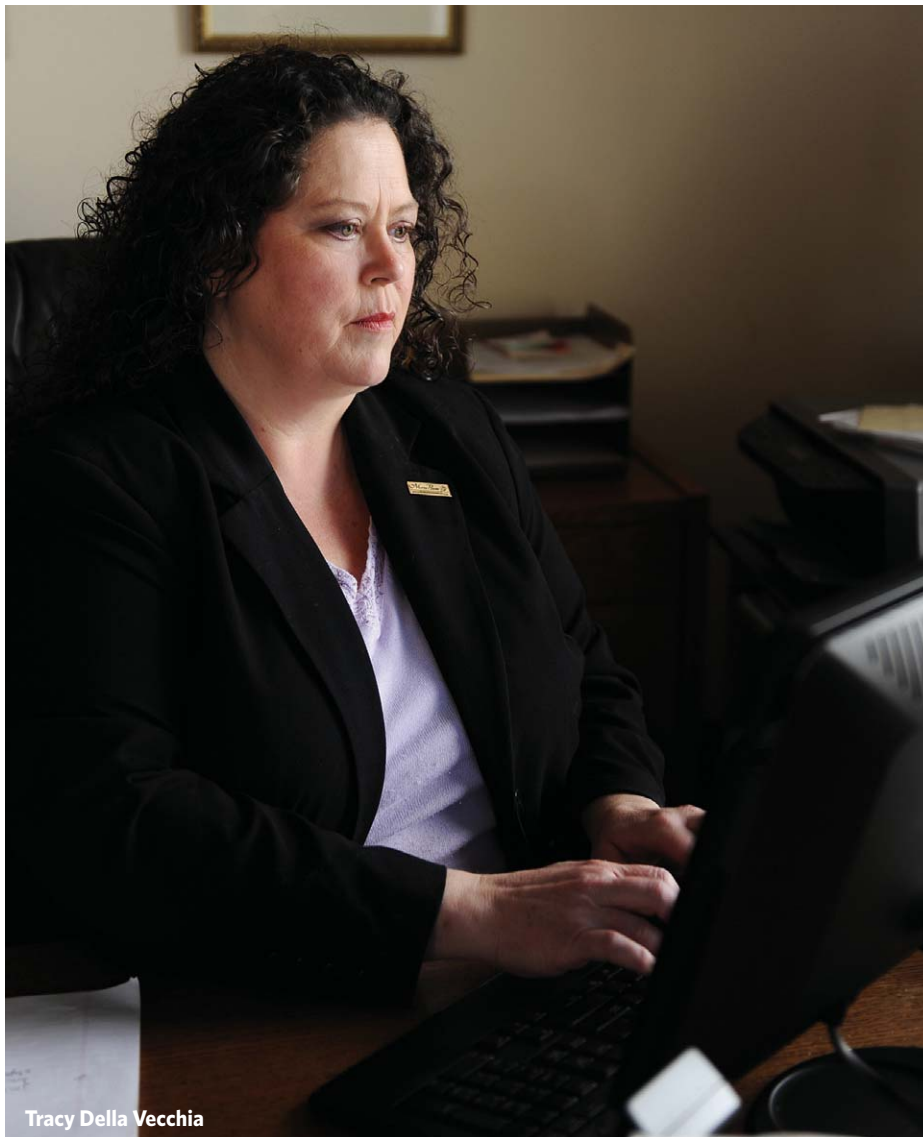
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Tracy Della Vecchia

and letters, which we forward to the [deployed] Marines. The morale boost is incredible."

The organization's Purple Heart Family Support volunteers provide meals at U.S. naval hospitals in Bethesda, Md., and San Diego at least once a month for the families of recuperating Marines.

Sleepless Nights

Many who rely on MarineParents.com become close online friends with others they have never met in person. Strong bonds of friendship and camaraderie are commonplace for those who venture into the cyberspace environment of MarineParents.com.

A self-described "Marine Mom from Kansas," named Tammie was drawn to the Web site when her Marine was deployed.

"I can't tell you how many sleepless nights I would come down to my comput-

er with a cup of tea and a warm blanket to sit with y'all 'on the porch,'" she says. "I'm so thankful for this Web site. We will get through this together, and we will not rest until everyone is home."

A dad who logs in as "Hillbilly Mac... from Illinois" says, "We come to this site to bring comfort to each other and to receive comfort when we need it." His son is a Navy corpsman who served in combat with the Marines.

Another frequent online visitor is "Carol, A Marine Mom from Texas," who posted: "I am truly thankful for Tracy and her vision and inspiration for this Web site, because it really has been a godsend to all of us, and truly a community of support and friendship." ■

For more information, visit
www.MarineParents.com.

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