

Every day is Memorial Day for Gold Star Families

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On Memorial Day, Gold Star Families — families of military servicemembers who have died while serving in the U.S. military— encourage others to remember the meaning behind the holiday.

“Being a Gold Star Mother is really a catch-22,” said Beth Funk, a IT Team Lead for American Airlines in Fort Worth, Texas. “You’re very sad to lose your child, but you’re proud of them because they gave their life for something bigger — for our country.”

Beth became a Gold Star Mother in 2013 when her son, U.S. Army Sgt. Joshua Strickland, lost his life while serving in Afghanistan. He was killed in an insider attack when a soldier in the Afghan National Army turned his gun on Strickland’s unit during a training exercise at the base. Sgt. Strickland called out to the gunman to divert attention away from others and on to him, and his heroic actions spared the life of another American Soldier.

“For Gold Star Families, every day is Memorial Day,” Beth said. “This weekend, many people mark the beginning of summer with barbeques and travel, but I’d ask that everyone take a moment of silence at 3 p.m. on Monday to think about the meaning behind Memorial Day and honor those who gave their lives for our freedom.”

This year, in partnership with **The American Fallen Soldiers Project**, American installed a display at Dallas Fort Worth International Airport (DFW) that features portraits of fallen heroes, including Sgt. Strickland, near Gate C2. The American Fallen Soldiers Project is a nonprofit organization that offers hand-painted portraits of fallen military to their families and provides replicas for displays — like the one at DFW. The display, featuring the paintings by artist Phil Taylor, is a way for customers and team members to honor our fallen military servicemembers this weekend.

Beth said she remembers Joshua’s big hugs and how his beautiful smile lit up a room. “I don’t want my son to be

forgotten," she said. "That's our biggest fear as Gold Star Families, that our heroes will be forgotten. These displays comfort me in knowing that my son's memory will live on."

American's Chicago chapter of the Veteran Military Employee Business Resource Group (VMEBRG) helped bring a similar display called "Portrait of a Solider" to Chicago O'Hare International Airport (ORD), which depicts hundreds of fallen servicemembers from Illinois. ORD Aviation Maintenance Technician (AMT) Gregory Daniels had the opportunity to view the display and honor his son, Nickolas Daniels, a U.S. Marine who was killed in action in Afghanistan in November 2011.

"He should be here, and it's sad that he's not," Gregory said. "But because of my son — and everyone else included in this display — other people were able to come home. I'm proud of that, but it's still hard."

Looking at his son's portrait, Gregory remembered Nick's larger-than-life personality. He said that he was a great older brother to his siblings and would do anything for his family and friends. The day he died, he was protecting his unit, and, because of that selflessness, his fellow Marines returned home safely.

Gregory wants to remind others to pause and think about the meaning of Memorial Day this year, specifically, the heroes who made the ultimate sacrifice for our freedom. Sharing their stories with the younger generation, he said, is an important piece in keeping their memory alive.

"Just remember the ones who aren't here — the ones who didn't make it home, the ones who died on foreign soil fighting for your right to have that barbeque," he said. "And make sure to tell your kids so they can tell their kids and so on."

Gregory Daniels with his wife in front of a portrait of their son Nickolas.

Beth Funk and her son Joshua.

The American Fallen Soldiers Project display at DFW Airport.