“Thank you for your service” is a familiar phrase to military families. While it is said with sincerity, it often punctuates the military-civilian divide so deeply felt by the .05% of service men and women and their families. It is a phrase that begins and ends a conversation and while those who say it truly mean it, it does not convey the enormity of their gratitude for the sacrifices that our military and their families make for the security of our nation.

So, what else can the civilian community do? When a military officer was asked what he needed in Iraq, he said, “Please don’t send cookies, care package, or socks. Just help take care of our children.”

Since 2004, Our Military Kids has given our donors a way to go beyond saying “thank you for your service” by providing grants to the children of our deployed Guardsmen, Reservists, and Wounded Warriors of any branch to participate in an extracurricular activity of their choosing.

Our Military Kids allows children and their parents to select an activity best suited to their specific needs. Some kids excel at sports. Others enjoy fine arts. Tutoring is a necessity for some. There is no one-size-fits-all solution to help military kids cope with and reduce the stress that comes from a parent’s deployment or injury.

Contained within the pages of this book are the stories of military kids who have accomplished or overcome tremendous challenges while supporting a parent who was deployed or recovering from a combat related injury. These activities were made possible through the generosity of our donors. Donors that wanted to say, “thank you for your service” in a way that had a lasting and positive impact for our military families.

With a 4 Star Charity Navigator Rating you too can say “thank you” and feel good about giving to Our Military Kids at ourmilitarykids.org.
“Abigail’s passion for soccer kept her from spiraling into a deep depression,” says her mom Wendy.

Abigail was nine years old when she received her first of three Our Military Kids’ grants for soccer.

“Soccer was her main way to escape from the stresses at home,” says Wendy.

Abigail’s dad has a traumatic brain injury from his deployments with the Army National Guard. He is no longer able to control what he says. Because of his combat-related PTSD, small family disagreements would turn into huge deals. Abigail and her older brother Alex needed an outlet.

“If Abigail hadn’t had soccer to help her deal with her new reality at home, I honestly don’t know where she would be,” says Wendy.

Fortunately, soccer was able to sustain Abigail through high school. It was then, Abigail realized she had a passion for caring for animals.

At 16, she was able to attend Purdue University Senior Boiler Vet Camp thanks to an Our Military Kids’ grant. This week-long camp for high school students provided Abigail the opportunity to observe a veterinary surgery, conduct physical exams, and analyze blood for parasites.

Because of her experience at camp, Abigail, now 19, is a sophomore at Purdue University studying bioscience and veterinary medicine.

“The camp changed everything for her. It was then she knew she wanted to study veterinary science. It exposed her to the Purdue campus,” says Wendy. “The connections she made at camp allowed her to secure a job in the animal lab, which is unheard of for a freshman. That week of camp will shape her entire career.”
“After my son tried to commit suicide, he had to stay on life support for four days,” says Alex’s mother Wendy. “It was a miracle he survived, but his spirit was still defeated. It was the Our Military Kids’ grant for Comic Con that turned his life around.”

As a child, Alex was very close to his dad, even with his dad’s two deployments in the Army National Guard. During one deployment, an IED changed both their lives forever.

“My husband was only able to leave the house for doctors’ appointments,” says Wendy. “Alex was at such a dark, depressed place because of how his father had changed.”

Loneliness fed Alex’s depression to the point of suicide when he was a senior in high school. He thought no one outside his family cared about him.

“Alex and his sister Abigail were the only ones in their school system who had a parent deployed in my husband’s unit,” says Wendy. “Their friends didn’t understand what they were going through with their father’s injuries.”

During his darkest days, comic books were Alex’s one escape. The grant to Comic Con in Denver was the catalyst for proving to Alex people cared.

“He sobbed for 20 minutes when he opened the grant package. Then, his mood changed. I hadn’t seen him smile like that in years,” says Wendy.

Because of the trip to Comic Con, Alex turned his grades around. He has since gone to college. He’s now a year away from graduating with a bachelor of science in graphic design and coding.
By age 20, Gabby had competed in two Olympic games and won three gold medals with the U.S. women’s gymnastics team.

Before dominating the international stage, Gabby needed top-notch training with the best coaches available.

When she was 11 years old, Gabby received an Our Military Kids’ grant to attend a gymnastics camp in Texas with renowned coaches Bela and Marta Karolyi.

“Gymnastics is an expensive sport. The grant from Our Military Kids was a financial blessing,” says Gabby’s mother Natalie. “Gabby had just entered into elite gymnastics. This camp gave her the opportunity to train with gymnasts on the U.S. team.”

Gabby’s father Timothy served in the Air National Guard. He deployed in 2003 and 2006.

It was during her father’s second deployment that the grant from Our Military Kids put the cost of the invitation-only camp within her family’s reach.

“In the grand scheme of things, $500 may not seem like that much money. For our family, $500 made the difference between keeping Gabby at home and sending her to a camp. This camp would play a part in molding her into the Olympic gymnast she is today,” says Natalie.

“Those foundational steps were crucial and critical for where she is now. I can’t thank all of the Our Military Kids’ donors enough for giving us this opportunity,” says Natalie.

“I know I speak for all military kids when I say thank you for making this funding available to help us pursue our dreams!” says Gabby.
“It felt like Our Military Kids’ grants came at the most impressionable moments in Paul and Mitchell’s lives. These grants have shaped their futures,” says their mother Myla.

Because of their grants, Paul is considering a career with the Air Force’s robotic division, and Mitchell wants to be an Air Force officer.

During Paul’s senior year of high school, he received an Our Military Kids’ grant to travel with his robotics team to St. Louis. There, his team won the semi-world championship of the international high school robotics competition.

A few months later, Paul and his team won the robotics world championship in Bedford, N.H. That fall, he enrolled in Michigan Tech University on an academic scholarship to study mechanical engineering.

Throughout these milestones, the boys’ dad Jacob was serving a six-month deployment in the Middle East.

“Two teenagers navigating their school year, summer and graduation without dad was rough,” says Myla.

For Mitchell, his dad’s deployment brought on anxiety, which showed in his school performance.

“An Our Military Kids’ grant for Civil Air Patrol’s Search and Rescue Camp changed everything for him,” says Myla. At camp, Mitchell began to realize his leadership abilities and committed himself to excelling in school.

Now, Mitchell is active in Civil Air Patrol in his high school, building on his experience at the camp. He’s actively seeking Air Force ROTC scholarships and applying to the Air Force Academy.
At seven years old, his dad’s deployment as a staff sergeant with the Army National Guard has noticeably impacted Rashad’s daily routine. “A seven-year-old can’t talk about his feelings properly,” says Rashad’s mom Tiffany. “Drumming helps Rashad express himself in a way he can’t in words. And it brings him such joy.”

Drumming lessons, practice and recitals give Rashad something positive to focus on in between school and his dad Emile’s nightly calls. “When a parent is deployed, it’s not an extracurricular activity. It’s truly something essential to the family,” says Tiffany.

An Our Military Kids’ grant has provided Rashad with twice-weekly drumming lessons for the duration of his dad’s 400-day deployment. “Drumming has given Rashad an incentive to work hard at school and home, even when he’s sad about his dad being gone,” says Tiffany.

Rashad’s enthusiasm is palpable. On the nights of his lessons, he runs off the school bus and immediately starts on his homework and chores.

This strong work ethic -- and patriotism -- runs deeply in the family. Tiffany also serves as a staff sergeant in the Army National Guard. “We’ve made a commitment as a family to serve our country. Even though they miss him terribly, Rashad and his brother Ahmad are extremely proud of their dad,” she says.

Tiffany is grateful to Our Military Kids’ donors. “Thank you! Your gift has given our child a way to grow emotionally while not worrying about his dad being in harm’s way.”
“Taekwondo was more than a distraction while my mom was deployed. It gave me a supportive community. I’m still very close with the people who helped me through that time,” Ryan says.

Ryan trained in martial arts during his mother’s deployment to Afghanistan in 2012 thanks to a grant from Our Military Kids.

“Taekwondo increased my confidence in my physical abilities and gave me the discipline to train hard for an important goal,” Ryan says. This discipline has been pivotal in his path to serve in the military.

In high school, Ryan dreamt of attending the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. He was deeply disappointed when he wasn’t accepted to the service academy the first time he applied in 2014.

A year later, he applied again, adding his recent black belt credential to his application package. Today he’s a member of West Point’s class of 2019.

“The only significant thing that was different in the second application was the black belt,” says Ryan’s mother Fran, a lieutenant colonel in the Kansas National Guard.

The next year, Ryan’s brother Evan also became a West Point cadet, joining the class of 2020.

Both Ryan and Evan wrote in their West Point application essays their mom’s deployment was a pivotal time for them. It was because of her deployment they understood military service and the sacrifices the entire family had to make.

“I hope to serve in cyber operations and to stay in the Army for 20 years or more,” says Ryan.
I would miss my dad all day long and worry for his safety when he was deployed. But when I had a surf lesson, it was an escape for me. I would leave my surf class in a great mood!” Samantha says.

When Samantha was nine years old, her dad Jeff deployed for over a year with the Army National Guard. He deployed again when she was 13 and 15 years old.

While he was overseas the first time, Samantha applied for an Our Military Kids’ grant in order to try something new – surfing.

“I initially chose to learn how to surf because my dad really liked it,” she says. “I wanted to surprise him when he got back, and I ended up loving it and sticking with it.”

Samantha, now 15 years old, ranks third nationally in her age group. She has earned a spot on the USA surf team. She’s currently training to compete in the 2020 Olympics in Japan.

“Because of surfing, I have a healthy, active lifestyle. I’ve traveled the world and met new friends. I’ve learned hard life lessons that taught me perseverance and drive,” she says.

“My dad is super proud of me, and I am very proud of him and what he does for our country,” she said.

“I would like to thank the people who donated to give me these grants from the bottom of my heart. Without your donations I would not have discovered surfing. My life was changed thanks to the Our Military Kids’ grants,” says Samantha.