

Dept. of Military Affairs: Wisconsin Guard family members reflect on White House visit

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by Vaughn R. Larson

Spouses and children of Wisconsin National Guard members were among First Lady Jill Biden's guests at a three-hour event on supporting service members and their families Nov. 30 at the White House. Guard leaders and families from more than 30 states and territories attended the session.

The first lady leads the Joining Forces initiative, with a mission to support "those who also serve — military and veteran families, caregivers and survivors." The initiative supports military families, including caregivers and survivors as well as families of service members and veterans. Areas of emphasis include employment and entrepreneurship for military spouses, military child education, and military family health and well-being.

Brig. Gen. David May, Wisconsin's deputy adjutant general for Air, and his wife Jeanette attended the event. May invited Valerie Schmitt and her children Joseph and Landen to accompany them. Schmitt is married to Master Sgt. Ed Schmitt, first sergeant for the Wisconsin National Guard's 54th Civil Support Team (CST). The 54th CST is a full-time National Guard specialized unit comprising Army and Air National Guard members trained to respond to chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear emergencies. The Madison, Wisconsin-based unit is designed to rapidly deploy, assist local first responders in determining the nature of an attack or hazardous materials scenario, and provide medical, communications, technical support and advice.

“Brig. Gen. May knows our family and that we are adaptable,” Valerie said. “I was a family readiness group leader and volunteer for many years with the CST. My husband has been a well-respected member of the team for a long time, and we have two middle-school-aged children who could represent Wisconsin.”

Valerie said her husband could have taken the boys to the event but allowed her to have the experience.

“I have the opportunity to go to many interesting places and events through my duties at the CST,” Master Sgt. Schmitt said. “It was my family’s turn this time.”

Valerie said she was honored to be part of the Joining Forces event at the White House.

“Our leaders care and are dedicated to our military families and their well-being,” she said. “The first lady took time to speak with a group of military children — mine included — about their life experiences and asked for their opinions and thoughts. This was an unforgettable experience and was simply amazing.”

Master Sgt. Schmitt said that, like many National Guard families, his spouse and children make sacrifices on account of his service responsibilities.

“This event demonstrates that their sacrifice is noticed and recognized locally by our leadership, and nationally as well,” he said. “It also helped my sons understand — though they are the only military children that they knew of outside of my co-workers — that there are families like us all over the nation.”

“I don’t really see it as being different from anybody else,” Landen said at the event of his upbringing as the child of a Guard member. “I just want to help my dad. If he’s going to put himself out there to serve the country, then I can help at home while he’s gone.”

May said she was delighted to be asked by the White House Joining Forces team to share challenges and concerns and provide feedback as a spouse of a National Guard member.

“I have had several phone calls with the Joining Forces team to help them understand the challenges military spouses face with regards to employment,” May said, “and have been able to offer suggestions and ideas on how the Joining Forces team can better support military families and spouses in particular.

“I think it is encouraging that the White House has a strong focus on expanding the Joining Forces initiative,” she continued, “and that they are working hard to understand the Guard perspective — which is different from the active duty perspective.”

Valerie said the Joining Forces program leaders are looking for ways to ensure Guard families have the tools they need to succeed. Services such as child care, accessible insurance, navigating available resources, and time away from the service member were discussed.

“It was good to hear that those challenges we face are being recognized by leadership,” Valerie said, “and that they want to take action to assist. This was an unforgettable experience and was simply amazing.”

First lady Biden said National Guard members and their families may be the only service members many civilians know — but because Guard members generally are not in uniform on a daily basis, that service connection might not be obvious.

“We wanted them to be a part of this special day because they represent the heart of our communities — men and women who choose to serve even as they pursue other careers, who answer the call of duty in our hometowns as quickly as disasters strike and needs arise,” Biden said. “Though our nation relies on their courage, the service of our Guardsmen and women and of their families often goes unseen — especially children of National Guard members.

“That’s why it’s important for us to tell your stories through our Joining Forces initiative,” Biden said.

Master Sgt. Jim Greenhill and Sgt. 1st Class Zach Sheely contributed to this report.