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A son lost, a family found



Town shows wealth of compassion after death in Iraq



JAMES ANNESS/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Ron and Robin Griffin at home in Emerson. Ron Griffin says he could tell stories about kindness shown after the death of his son Kyle, in portrait, top.

"Every time I hugged somebody a little of the pain went away."
RON GRIFFIN, WHOSE SON WAS KILLED IN IRAQ

By BOB IVRY
STAFF WRITER

Ron Griffin doesn't do handshakes. Not since Kyle died. No. Ron Griffin hugs. If you don't like it, you don't have to come into his house.

So hug him. Go ahead.

Once inside the house, you'll see Kyle everywhere. Kyle in a photo as a kid, with his arms around his little brother and sister. Kyle on a baseball card, swinging a bat. Kyle in a pastel drawing that was given to the Griffins the day of the funeral.

Kyle Griffin died May 30 in the rain, on a dirt road pocked with bomb craters outside of Mosul, Iraq. Twenty years old. A squirrelly kid. "A royal pain in the ass," his father says. A teenager who preferred dirt bikes to studying, who called his dog "Fud-bud." Who graduated from Emerson High in 2000 and "made believe" he was going to Bergen Community College for a year before he enlisted in the Army. A kid who loved the Army. Who was proud to wear the red beret of the 101st Airborne. A kid who earned a Bronze Star for bravery.

A kid who died.

It's been exactly a year since war began in Iraq. A year in which Ron and Robin Griffin became parents of one of New Jersey's 13 war dead. Parents of one of the 570 Americans who will never come home from Operation Iraqi Freedom.

But the stories you'll hear in the Griffins' living room in Emerson aren't about regret. They're not about anger. They're not about the hundreds of "what ifs" a father tortures himself with late at night. No. The stories Ron Griffin will tell you

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Soldier: After death in Iraq, a grieving family finds solace

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are about how amazing people can be when you need them most. Stories about the outpouring of love and support the Griffins received after Kyle was killed. About how their little town rallied around them.

And it's not just one story.

"I can tell you story after story after story after story," Ron Griffin says.

He can tell you about all the folks who surprised him by showing up to pay their respects – the patients from the medical office where Robin works, the two-star general who flew in, the boys Ron had coached in rec football, and the friends who skipped school to be there for Kyle's brother, Ryan, and sister, Blair. About how Ron's boss hired a bus to bring all of his co-workers to the church.

Ron will tell you about Sgt. 1st Class Tyrone Russell, the Army's casualty assistance officer, who spent an hour making sure Kyle's uniform was perfect. He'll tell you about the poem Russell wrote about Kyle called "Airborne Angel," and about how the poem so touched Blair that it pulled her out of her silent grief and she read it at the church service.

He'll tell you about the neighbors who decided to build a memorial to Kyle. About the donations that came pouring in. Five grand from the Saddle Brook VFW. The three dollar bills stapled to a note from senior citizens in Emerson. Ron will tell you he's amazed they raised $30,000, and will unveil a monument June 12 at a park on Ackerman Avenue. He'll tell you that one day there may be a special kids' waiting room at Pascack Valley Hospital bearing Kyle's name.

With tears in his eyes, Ron Griffin will tell you about Kyle's comrades, the ones who were in the truck with Kyle and Mike Gleason and Zack Long, who got the boys' blood on their hands and will never forget. They came to visit – twice. Out of duty. Out of respect. Out of love.

It's story after story, and it doesn't stop.

It starts when the car pulled up, the military car from Fort Monmouth. Ron got home from work late – he's second-shift supervisor at the Sankar cheese packaging plant in Wood-Ridge – and he went out to the patio around midnight to chew on a Cohiba. That's when he saw them, three of them, in dress uniform, get out of the car. "We're sorry," they told him.

One of the Griffins' neighbors, a Bergenfield cop, saw the car. He knew what it meant and he made calls. By 7 the next morning, the three-bedroom house on the corner lot was packed.

"People came out of the woodwork," says Mike Malure, who lives across the street.

"We had so many people in the house, the chairs broke," Ron Griffin says, his voice catching. "We had to get new chairs."

The Griffins were told Kyle's body would be arriving at Dover Air Force Base in Delaware. Mike Saudino, Emerson's police chief, was over the house. "Kyle's not going to come back alone," he said.

Saudino piled the Griffins and a dozen others into his 42-foot motor home. He sent a message over the statewide police teletype, inviting escorts. More than a hundred officers, in cars and motorcycles, joined in.

At Dover, civilians were prohibited. But Ron Griffin wanted to be there when they slipped his son into the hearse. Russell, the Army's casualty assistance officer, made phone call after phone call. He went up the chain of command until he found someone who would give the OK.

On the way back, they stopped for gas. The Army escort got out of the hearse and stood at full attention, guarding Kyle's body. Even today, Mike Malure's voice gets thick when he tells this story, and he has to stop.

When the line of cars and motorcycles reached Kinderkamack Road, Saudino turned to Ron and said, "We brought your son home." They looked out the windows. On both sides of the road, Kyle's neighbors were lined up, waving flags.

At the funeral home, the line of people snaked through three rooms and out the door. They were there from 2 in the afternoon till 11 that night. Ron hugged every one of them. "Every time I hugged somebody a little of the pain went away," he says.

Kyle Griffin had found his niche in the Army. He was doing what he loved. How many people love doing what they do? He was a long-range surveillance scout. He was part of a six-man team that collected intell on enemy troops, convoys, bridge fortifications. They painted laser targets for air bombing. Ron says Kyle may have sneaked into Iraq before the war started, but he's not sure. Nobody's saying. Top secret.

Kyle wrote to Ron: "We've done a lot of neat [stuff]."

Somehow, Kyle bagged a Bronze Star. It's unheard of. Nobody at Kyle's rank – E4, or specialist – gets a Bronze Star.

But in March, two months before he died, Kyle earned one. Kyle never told them. His parents still don't know the story behind it. Nobody's saying. Top secret.

What they do know is that on May 30 on a dirt road between Tikrit and Mosul, a heavy rain was falling. Kyle was in a truck, part of a three-vehicle convoy on the way to a ceremony of some sort. The Humvee in front swerved to avoid a bomb crater, and Kyle's truck swerved to avoid hitting the Humvee. The truck rolled three times. Kyle, his best buddy Zachariah Long, and Spec. Mike Gleason were killed.

When the Griffins visited Zack Long's parents in Pennsylvania last summer, Ron told them something he'd never said before. Something he'd never even told Robin: *I'm having a hard time thinking that my son went to Iraq and died in a truck accident.*

"That's the only way they could have died," Zack's mom told Ron. "If they were killed in combat, that would mean they made a mistake. And they were too good for that."

At that moment, Ron says, the doubt was gone. Gone. "I would have lived with it the rest of my life," he says. "But she said a few magical words, so simple, so easy, and it changed everything for me."

Without what happened, Ron says, maybe you never find out how good people can be. Maybe you never have that conversation with Mrs. Long. With your neighbors.

Before Kyle's death, the Griffins were thinking about moving out of Emerson.

"I didn't like this town," Robin says. "It's so political, the taxes are high, and you can't fart without people talking." But afterward, she told Ron, "Don't ever let me say anything bad about Emerson again."

Life lurches on. The flags in town were at half-staff. Now they're high again. Ron still wears Kyle's dog tags. He plays with them, under his Army T-shirt. One of the tags is bent, from the accident.

Across the street, Mike Malure's boy, Matthew, plays with toy soldiers. He calls one of them Kyle.

A gold star, symbolizing "killed in action," hangs in the window. The yellow ribbons on the Japanese maple in the Griffins' front yard have faded. Kyle's red Ford F-150 Sport sits in the driveway. The registration has expired. Ron thought about getting rid of it. But Ryan, Kyle's 17-year-old brother, wouldn't let him. "Dad, that's Kyle's truck," he said. "Don't ever sell it."

Ron gets out Kyle's Statement of Faith, written for Sunday school when the boy was 12.

He reads it. "I think death is not that bad. A lot of people think your spirit lives on and goes to heaven where God and Jesus are. A lot of people think life is over but you will always live on in heaven." Ron isn't able to get the last sentence out. His throat is closed. He's crying.

A year after the beginning of the war, 10 months after burying his first-born son, Ron Griffin still supports the president, supports what we're doing in Iraq. But this is not just about politics. "If I'm against the war, I betray what Kyle did," he says.

It's hard for Blair, Robin says. She's 16. A teenager. She doesn't talk to her parents about it.

But there's that portrait of Kyle hanging in the dining room. The first thing you see coming out of the kitchen. Kyle in his red beret. Look at that smirk, says Mike Malure. That was Kyle.

"I kiss the portrait every morning," Robin says. It's behind glass, but even so, when Robin smooches it, she's careful not to touch it.

Then one day she looked at the glass from a particular angle. And she saw it. Lip marks.

It was Blair. She'd been kissing it. The portrait of her big brother. Kyle the hero.

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New Jersey's losses in Operation Iraqi Freedom

Since Operation Iraqi Freedom began on March 19, 2003, 570 Americans have died in Iraq. A list of New Jersey's dead:

- Army Spec. Michael Edward Curtin, 23, Howell, car bomb, March 29, 2003.
- Army Staff Sgt. Terry W. Hemingway, 39, Willingboro, car bomb, April 10, 2003.
- Army Spec. Gil Mercado, 25, Paterson, non-combat weapon discharge, April 13, 2003.
- Army Spec. Narson B. Sullivan, 21, North Brunswick, non-combat weapon discharge, April 25, 2003.
- Army Spec. Kyle A. Griffin, 20, Emerson, vehicle accident, May 30, 2003.
- Army Sgt. 1st Class Gladimir Philippe, 37, Roselle, unknown incident while on patrol, June 25, 2003.
- Army Spec. Simeon Hunte, 23, Newark, shot by Iraqi citizen, Oct. 1, 2003.
- Army 2nd Lt. Richard Torres, 25, Passaic, convoy ambushed, Oct. 6, 2003.
- Army Sgt. Joel Perez, 25, Newark, helicopter shot down, Nov. 3, 2003.
- Army Spec. Marlon P. Jackson, 25, Jersey City, bomb attack, Nov. 11, 2003.
- Army Spec. Ryan T. Baker, 24, Pemberton Township, helicopter crash, Nov. 15, 2003.
- Army Spec. Marc S. Seiden, 26, Brigantine, patrol ambushed, Jan. 2, 2004.
- Army 2nd Lt. Seth J. Dvorin, 24, East Brunswick, improvised explosive device (IED) exploded, Feb. 3, 2004.

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