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By Thomas Zimmerman, Army War College Public Affairs



*Amelia McConnell, who was named the Army Child of the Year by Operation Homefront, stands with her parents, Kathryn and Col. G. Scott McConnell.*

April 17, 2012 -- Multiple moves, changing schools, losing friends and finding something new around the corner – these hallmarks of life for military children are as common as they are notable. For **Amelia McConnell**, 17, military life was punctuated by war, death, illness, family, friends, faith and spirit and recognized by her selection as Army Child of the Year by Operation Homefront.

One of five military children of the year, they are the “best of the best,” according to Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Martin E. Dempsey who addressed the audience of military and family members gathered in Washington, D.C, to celebrate the children’s awards. *Joining the chairman was special guest speaker, Medal of Honor recipient Army Sgt. 1st Class Sammy L. Davis.*

“If I had to be identified as the best of the best among any group in America today, I’d actually like to be known as the best of the best among military kids, because of what we ask them to do, and what they do,” said Dempsey.

“What this whole experience has shown me are the effects of 9/11 for my generation,” said McConnell. “I was in class in Vicenza, Italy, when the attacks occurred and it didn’t really sink in to me what it meant. As a result of that day, both my father and brother deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan. I think I speak for the kids who are now realizing the impacts.”

She was surprised at the award.

“Knowing how many kids were nominated for this, it was a shock to be named a winner,” she said. “It’s an honor to even be nominated, to represent all military kids. It’s a blessing to be the one who is able to share my story.”

McConnell is youngest child of Kathryn and Col. G. Scott McConnell, who is faculty director for Army Planning at the U.S Army War College. She and her family have moved nine times since she was born and in 2006, her father was diagnosed with leukemia shortly after returning from Iraq. When remission followed treatment, he returned to Iraq in 2007. Two years later, Amelia’s brother, Army Sgt. Andrew McConnell, was killed in Afghanistan.

When her father left for Afghanistan, Amelia said she made it a point to make life as easy as she could for her mother.

“His first deployment was a challenge for me, I was only in the fifth grade,” said McConnell. “I was watching my mom run all over the place with six kids trying to get us all to our activities. It was an adjustment for all of us.”

When he returned home she said there were more adjustments needed.

“It was a big transition, going from a year of only hearing his voice every few days to having him back in the house,” she said.

Then her father was diagnosed with leukemia.

“It was really hard because all I wanted was my dad because he was home,” she said. “He was always high-spirited but we knew he was sick. It was hard but I did my best to help my mom.”

Once he finished his treatments and the cancer was in remission, he was again deployed to Iraq in 2007.

“That was even tougher,” she said. “I just wanted that time with him. Having that taken away was difficult but I understand now that was his job and he loves doing it. He’s great at what he does.”

She said that her family togetherness was a vital part of helping her get through the tough times.

“I look up to them. They set the path for me and taught me some very important lessons,” she said.

Close friends also helped, as they understood her experiences.

“While my dad was deployed, I had friends who supported me because they understood what was going through our minds with worry and the stress at home ... that ‘need’ to talk to your dad but you can’t,”

she said. “We all understood the sacrifices that were being made. So when we were having those rough days we can relate to each other.”

She admitted the stresses of being a military child can be hard to manage but do have their rewards.

“It can be a struggle at times, but it’s also helped shape who I am.”

McConnell said that her father’s most recent deployment was especially tough.

“It was tough to have him gone again,” she said. “Plus, he was going to the place where my brother was killed the year before.”

Through everything she maintained a 3.75 grade point average and began volunteering for the Wounded Warrior Project, a charity her brother had designated for donations in the event of his death. At Carlisle High School, Amelia became a member of the many National Honor Societies including German National Honor Society, and National Art Honor Society for which she served as vice president.

In addition to her volunteer work, McConnell also plays varsity soccer, plays acoustic guitar in her church band and helps raise money for cancer research.

McConnell also helps “pay-it-forward” by volunteering as a soccer coach for the Youth Services Sports programs.

“When I was a kid I remember playing sports at the Youth Services with the other kids and it was such a great experience,” she said. “I wanted to help create that for others. I love teaching others and sharing my love of the game.”

McConnell shared some advice for other military children.

“Get involved. Moving around there are plenty of opportunities to get and involved and once you are you will meet more people and become more comfortable,” she said. “It really makes it an easier transition.”

McConnell will graduate this Spring and plans to attend Longwood University and major in Graphic Design.

McConnell was chosen from more than 1,000 nominees as the Army’s military child of the year by a committee including active duty military personnel, Family Readiness Support Assistants, teachers, military mothers, and community members. A teacher and family friend, Theresa Dixon, nominated her for the award.

Each award recipient received \$5,000 and was honored at a special recognition ceremony on April 5, 2012. As part of the award, they received a private tour of the White House and the Capitol Building and were honored at a gala later that night.

The other winners included:

- James Nathaniel Richards, of Jamul, Calif., for the Navy
- Chelsea Rutherford, 17, of Panama City, Fla., for the Air Force
- Erika Booth, 16, of Jacksonville, N.C., for the Marine Corps
- Alena Deveau, 17, of Fairfax, Va., for the Coast Guard.

### **Military Child of the Year Award Background**

Ideal candidates for the Military Child of the Year Award demonstrate resilience and strength of character, and thrive in the face of the challenges of military life. They demonstrate leadership within their families and within their communities.

“The sons and daughters of America’s service members learn what patriotism is at a very young age,” said Jim Knotts, President & CEO of Operation Homefront. “Children in military families understand sacrifice and live with the concept of service. This is what the Military Child of the Year Award honors.”

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