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In the holiday season of giving, a 9/11 widow provides a lesson

By Bella English | December 16, 2007

Almost seven Christmases ago, Christie Coombs of Abington was newly widowed, left to raise three children alone after her husband, Jeff, was killed on American Airlines Flight 11, which terrorists crashed into New York City's World Trade Center. She was 40 years old, the kids 13, 11, and 7. In their numb state of grief, they stumbled through the holidays that year.

But she never forgot the party the City of New York threw for the families of 9/11 victims.

"It was a nice distraction from the awfulness of us having to face Christmas without Jeff," she recalled recently.

Coombs was running around Monday, putting finishing touches on her own holiday party at Gillette Stadium, this one for a different group of family members: those whose loved ones have served in Iraq or Afghanistan, or are still there - or were killed in the line of duty. Some of the troops home on leave were at the stadium, too, pushing strollers or holding tiny hands.

Coombs put out the call, and about 400 families from Massachusetts - and some from other New England states - came to the posh Fidelity Investment Clubhouse, which overlooks the Patriots' hallowed ground. There were infants in snugglies, toddlers in strollers, teenagers in baggy pants, harried-looking mothers, even elderly parents on walkers who came to celebrate the holidays, thanks to Coombs and her elves.

The elves included her daughters, now 13 and 17 (her son is away at college), and their friends. They included Cindy McGinty of Foxborough, another 9/11 widow who was there with her son, who also helped out. Diann Corcoran of Norwell, whose husband, Jay, was killed in 9/11, was there in her Santa hat to lend a hand. There were many more volunteers who worked at face-painting and tattoo tables, put on clown suits, did caricatures of the kids, watched over the toddler area, performed magic tricks, did crafts projects, and so on.

Santa was there with gifts, and each child got a photo taken and another goody bag on the way out. In a quiet corner, there were manicures and massages for weary adults. Patriots running back Kevin Faulk sat at a table signing autographs, while former quarterback Steve Grogan was swooned over by middle-age moms. Wally the Green Monster made the trip from Fenway Park to sling a furry arm around folks and pose for pictures. "Cinderella" and "The Little Mermaid" hugged young ones. Actors Chris Cooper and his wife, Marianne Leone Cooper, of Kingston made an appearance.

Informational tables from several veterans' groups were set up, and a color guard from Otis Air Force Base came to honor the families.

"I want people to walk in here and feel wowed," said Coombs, an occasional freelancer for the Globe.

It was little more than two months after her husband's death that she began to raise funds for other 9/11 families who "didn't have the support we've had," she said at the time. That November, she, her children, and their friends held a yard sale and auction at a local elementary school. The following year saw the start of the annual Jeff Coombs Memorial Road Race in the fall and an annual auction in the spring.

Over the years, the foundation in his name has given away nearly \$275,000. It has provided holiday dinners for those in need, helped pay funeral expenses, sent grieving families on vacation, built wheelchair ramps, paid for counseling, sent hundreds of care packages to troops, and provided scholarships, among other things.

For the Gillette party, Christie Coombs raised about \$9,000. The Patriots donated the space and gave a discount on the catering: chicken, pizza, hot dogs and hamburgers, plus an ice cream sundae bar and other desserts. A DJ spun songs and all stood at attention while the national anthem was sung, many with their hands over their hearts.

James Burke of Walpole has been in Iraq for six months and is home on leave until next week. He was accompanied by his wife, Jessica, their 2-year-old daughter, and year-old son. "It's a really cool thing for them to do this," he said. The kids were interested in the clowns, while he was interested in meeting Kevin Faulk.

Cathy Hayes from Hanover was there with her six children, ranging in age from three months to 15 years. "My husband, Brian, actually called from Afghanistan this morning. I told him we were coming here, and he was so happy there are things like this to support his family while he's over there." This is his second Christmas away from home. "We miss him a lot," she added.

Alicia Morgan grew up in Milton with her identical twin brothers: Joel is serving in Baghdad, while Jonathan will ship over in January. Alicia was on a mission: to get photos and autographs for her brothers. Their stepmother, Niki French, who lives in Brockton, said that when she told Joel about the party, he was jealous. "He said, 'You guys get to go, and I'm here.' I think it's wonderful the way [Coombs] has embraced the families."

For her part, Coombs had another motive. "So many of these men signed on because of 9/11. It just breaks my heart. It makes me feel guilty." Of course, any thinking person would beg her not to feel that way.

Cindy McGinty, who also started a foundation in the memory of her husband, Michael, stood for a few minutes at a table with several candles, each honoring a fallen soldier from Massachusetts. "I just want the families to relax and forget for a few minutes and to find community like Christie and I did with the other 9/11 families. It just seemed like the right thing to do."

That these gracious women - and their kids - with grievous losses of their own could be so giving and caring is a humbling holiday lesson for us all. In fact, to steal Coombs's line, it could make a person feel downright guilty.

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