

above and beyond

Shelle Michaels has the heart of a volunteer

- By CAMILLE BRELAND -

It's a rare occasion that a full-time student, mother of three and university instructor has time for much of, well, anything else. But those titles just skim the surface of what patriot and hero Shelle Michaels takes on daily as a champion for the Army National Guard and the rest of our Armed Forces.

Shelle wasn't an Army brat; her parents weren't in the Guard. But she still managed to acquire an unflinching respect for our service men and women seen most often in those who grew up around it. For as long as she can remember, Shelle has admired—no, been in awe of—individuals who dedicate their lives to the protection and well-being of our great nation and its citizens.

But she truly opened her heart to volunteering and serving our nation's heroes after the tragic Columbine school shootings in 1999. At the time, Shelle was living in Aurora, CO, while her husband was stationed at Buckley Air Force Base, where she led the base's spouse group. After the shooting, her group began connecting with and supporting the Columbine community and victims' Families.



"Seeing a large area of the [Denver region] really be placed on the defensive ... I realized that at any given moment, that could be any of us in need of a helping hand," Shelle said. "At that point, I knew that involvement from the community in a vast capacity was crucial for healing and moving forward from the tragedies of that day. That forever changed my heart to volunteer."

After she moved back to her home state of North Dakota, Shelle knew she wanted to continue her military support but wasn't sure how. So, she turned to the information superhighway for help.

"I googled 'Soldier support,' and the first hit that I got was Soldiers' Angels," Shelle recalled.

She signed up to "Adopt a Soldier" that day in 2004, and four years later, she is now the organization's communications director.

Soldiers' Angels was founded in 2003 by Patti Patton-Bader, a mother whose two sons have served in Iraq. It is an all-volunteer organization dedicated to "providing aid and comfort to the men and women of the United States Army,

DAVE VORLAND

"Volunteering brings feelings of fulfillment and the knowledge that I have made a difference in someone's life."

—Shelle Michaels

Marines, Navy, Air Force, Coast Guard and their Families." These

volunteers do everything from sending care packages overseas, to visiting injured warriors in hospitals, to writing letters to military Families and fostering pets while their owners are deployed.

"We are serious and passionate as an organization in assuring that the needs of our nation's heroes are met," Shelle noted.

It's her passion that drives Shelle as a volunteer and leader, something not uncommon for Soldiers' Angels, its founder said.

"I've noticed with Soldiers' Angels, the volunteers have so much passion, and what I decided to do in the beginning is to give them a way to exercise their passion in the way that

they like," Patti told *Foundations*.

For Shelle, that avenue has been communications, a subject she has studied at the University of North Dakota in Grand Forks. She's now earning a master's degree in public relations and teaching classes. In fact, it was in one of her classes where she got the idea for a Soldiers' Angels program—Ladies of Liberty.

The program originated in 2006, when Shelle's Women's Studies class decided to adopt female Soldiers from the North Dakota Army National Guard's 188th Air Defense Artillery (ADA) as they deployed to Afghanistan. They began by sending letters of encouragement and thanks, but the project quickly turned into more as Shelle and her students formed unique bonds and friendships with these Soldiers.



Want to get involved? Find out how you can help by visiting SoldiersAngels.org. Read the Ladies of Liberty blog at SoldiersAngelsLadiesofLiberty.com.



May no Soldier go unloved,
May no Soldier walk alone,
May no Soldier be forgotten,
Until they all come home.


—Soldiers' Angels

"Working with the Soldiers of the North Dakota Army National Guard was really special for me," Shelle remarked. "My best friend was deployed with that unit, and now I have many dear friends stemming from that support."

The program now sends care packages geared for females with items like lotion, conditioner, toenail polish and mascara to help these women feel rejuvenated.

For her support, Soldiers from these units honored Shelle with their Freedom Salute's Outstanding Center of Influence Award and Distinguished Center of Influence Award.

Shelle says she'll continue to volunteer and work with Soldiers' Angels as long as she's able.

"I am the only person who can use the skills I was blessed with, and it is my path to discover where my skills best fit to make a difference in someone's life," she confessed. "I would hope that when the day comes that I am laid to rest, that people can smile and say, 'Shelle never missed an opportunity to create ways to make a difference in other lives.'" 



SGT DREW BALSTAD, 116TH PUBLIC AFFAIRS DETACHMENT

All Smiles: Shelle Michaels delivers pre-deployment support to LT Amber Monette, Commander of North Dakota's 1/188th Air Defense Artillery deploying in 2009. Standing behind Monette is SGT Vanessa Mozinski of the original Ladies of Liberty.