

[SHOW: BREAKING GROUND]

[AIRDATE: 09/19/14]

[HOST: MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA]

[STORY: MILITARY CHILDREN]

[CONTENT: MS. MARLA TALLEY, MS. BARBARA THOMPSON, MS. DEBORAH PHILLIPS, MS. DELORIS CARTER, MS. KRISTIE TEGTMEIER, MS. EILEEN HUCK, MS. ISIS LANGORIA, MS. JULIE ALLEN]

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**00:00:05**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

From WAMU in Washington, D.C. and PRI, Public Radio International, this is "Breaking Ground," a documentary series dedicated to unearthing stories you don't hear elsewhere. I'm Kavitha Cardoza.

**00:00:19**

**UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE #1**

Do you know my dad's in the military?

**00:00:21**

**UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE #2**

What if you're in the war and something gets stuck, like, a missile?

**00:00:26**

**UNIDENTIFIED MALE #1**

When I grow up, I'm gonna make a helicopter that flies and fights.

**00:00:31**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

These six year olds are a few of our nation's two million military children. In the next hour, we'll hear about their struggles, sacrifices and strengths. The 11 communities around the country and on military bases across the globe and their childhood has played out against the backdrop of America's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

**00:00:52**

**UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE #3**

I'm kind of scared that when he is deployed, he's not gonna come back.

**00:00:56**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

At any point, less than one percent of American adults are serving in the armed forces. So I didn't know much about the military and I certainly didn't know anything about military children. I mean, I love looking at photos of children hugging their parents in uniform after long deployments, but recently I started wondering, what happens in the days before that reunion? What about the days after? And what happens if a parent comes home from service very different or not at all? To answer these questions, I talked to military families across the country.

**00:01:31**

**MS. MARLA TALLEY**

Okay, this is it, welcome to Camp Lejeune.

**00:01:34**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

We start this hour at Camp Lejeune in Jacksonville, N.C. It's one of the largest Marine Corp bases in the U.S., about seven times the size of Manhattan.

**00:01:45**

**MS. MARLA TALLEY**

It goes on forever.

**00:01:47**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Meet Marla Talley, she's taking us on a guided tour. Talley points out rows of barracks, housing quarters for single Marines and a giant commissary, or general store. I look around at barbed wire fences, rows of armored vehicles and dozens of Marines doing jumping jacks. Most of the Marines here are young, 18 to 25 years old.

**00:02:09**

**MS. MARLA TALLEY**

They seem like babies to me. Definitely.

**00:02:12**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Speaking of babies, if this is what you think the military sounds like...

[SOUNDBITE OF MILITARY MEN DOING CHANT]

**00:02:20**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

...I found, at military bases, you'll also hear a lot of this...

[SOUNDBITE OF BABY CRYING]

**00:02:28**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Forty percent of military children are under the age of five.

00:02:32

UNIDENTIFIED MALE #2

Can I have hugs and kisses good-bye? Gonna be good for the teachers, not say, no?

00:02:37

MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA

Every day at a child development center, at Camp Lejeune, starting at 5:30 in the morning, there's a steady stream of Marines dropping off their children before they race to physical training. Marines in camouflage uniforms carry diaper bags and stuffed animals.

00:02:52

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE #4

Give mom a kiss.

[ KISSY SOUNDS ]

00:02:55

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE #4

Mmm, I love you. I love you.

00:02:56

MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA

Lance Corporal Jennifer Rialta signs in her 11-month-old daughter, Persephone, who's been at this center since she was 2 months old.

00:03:04

LANCE CORPORAL JENNIFER RIALTA

It allows me to focus on work rather than, you know, worry about what's going on all day.

00:03:09

MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA

Rialta loves the fact Persephone is constantly learning here.

00:03:12

LANCE CORPORAL JENNIFER RIALTA

She started pulling herself up, she started using her sippy cup, which she still refuses to do at home but she does it here, great.

00:03:20

MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA

Persephone is taking part in what's been called The Largest Childcare Program in the country.

00:03:25

MS. BARBARA THOMPSON

Two hundred-thousand children in 800 centers, 3,500 family childcare homes, about 40,000 employees.

00:03:31

MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA

That's Barbara Thompson, the director of the Office of Family Policy, Children and Youth for the Department of Defense. She says the military childcare system wasn't always good. In the early 1980s, it was referred to as "the ghetto" of American childcare.

**00:03:47**

**MS. BARBARA THOMPSON**

My center was a prefabricated chapel from Southeast Asia that had actually fallen off the ship, into the water. There were no toys and there was just the bin of broken crayons.

**00:03:57**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

There were cases of child abuse and neglect. Some centers had staff turnover of 300 percent, every year. Deborah Phillips, a professor of psychology at Georgetown University, says, there were Congressional Hearings. At the same time, she says, there were more women joining the military, more single mothers and more families where both parents served.

**00:04:18**

**MS. DEBORAH PHILLIPS**

So the need of the military families ramped up for childcare at exactly a time when these terrible conditions of childcare were being exposed.

**00:04:28**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

That led to the Military Childcare Act of 1989, a law that tried to systemically improve the cost, convenience and quality at these centers.

**00:04:38**

**MS. MARLA TALLEY**

And we thought we had just died and moved to Heaven.

**00:04:41**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

That's Marla Talley's way of saying, the childcare system was transformed. She oversees childcare at Camp Lejeune, Talley says, attitudes slowly began to shift and commanders began to recognize how important childcare was to the military's primary mission, defending the country.

**00:04:58**

**MS. MARLA TALLEY**

Whether they're on the rifle range, they're firing or they're qualifying, it requires them to concentrate on exactly what's happening, so that they'll be prepared for their ultimate goal, which is going to war. I can't go and train if I'm worried about whether or not my child is well cared for.

**00:05:13**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

The child development centers, just on this base, can now accommodate 1,600 children, from newborns to five year olds.

**00:05:21**

**MS. MARLA TALLEY**

Well, I had a pediatrician friend at the Naval Hospital and he said, there's two things that Marine's do well, they shoot their guns and they make babies. And when they come back, you can almost watch the calendar, within nine or ten months after the units return, then there's lots more babies being born.

[SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC]

**00:05:50**                      **CORPORAL JACOB KING**  
What do you got? You got keys?

**00:05:51**                      **MR. GRAYSON KING**  
Yeah.

**00:05:53**                      **MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**  
Two-year-old Grayson King is toddling about in his Superman shoes before being scooped up by his dad, Corporal Jacob King. He's a single father who works long hours on anti-tank missiles.

**00:06:04**                      **CORPORAL JACOB KING**  
This place stays open as long as I'm at work without charging more.

**00:06:09**                      **MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**  
The military subsidizes almost two-thirds the cost of childcare. Ninety-seven percent of military childcare centers have been accredited by an independent organization. That means they've been rated high quality compared to just 10 percent of civilian ones.

[SOUNDBITE OF SONG]

**00:06:29**                      **MS. DELORIS CARTER**  
C, D, E, F, G...

**00:06:30**                      **MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**  
Here at Camp Lejeune, teacher Deloris Carter works with infants, she's dancing up a storm and waving colored scarves in front of two babies, looking up at her.

**00:06:41**                      **MS. DELORIS CARTER**  
Oh. Come on babies. Come on my friends, come on...

**00:06:45**                      **MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**  
Carter says, her dancing has a purpose, the babies are hearing different rhythms and sounds.

**00:06:51**                      **MS. DELORIS CARTER**  
...yes, move your leg, move your leg...

**00:06:54**                      **MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**  
Learning is very intentional, even infants have individualized lesson plans.

**00:06:59**                      **MS. DELORIS CARTER**  
To help them to learn to reach, grasp and pull using their strong muscles in their legs.

**00:07:05**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Teachers in the military are paid more than teachers at civilian childcare centers, \$15 an hour versus less than \$10 on average. They also get military benefits, everything from retirement and vacation, to healthcare and access to the gym. And unlike their counterparts at civilian centers, they have to complete a certain amount of professional development. Experts say, the lynchpin of the system is, the more training you do, the more money you make. Teachers, Deloris Carter and Kristie Tegtmeier say, they love it.

**00:07:38**

**MS. DELORIS CARTER**

There's always training, always.

**00:07:40**

**MS. KRISTIE TEGTMEIER**

I mean, they pay for the training for you to make more money. They're always wanting you to better yourself. They want...

**00:07:46**

**MS. DELORIS CARTER**

They want you to be the best at -- yes.

**00:07:48**

**MS. KRISTIE TEGTMEIER**

...that you can be. Yeah. Just like they teach in the Marine Corp, be the best you can be.

**00:07:53**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Teachers here have to go a step further, they receive specialized training in how to help military children who face unique stresses, including their parents deploying for long periods of time. One way teachers help them process their feelings is by reading books that connect with their experiences.

**00:08:10**

**MS. DELORIS CARTER**

And mommy works at...

[ SOUNDBITE OF CHILDREN, "WORK" ]

**00:08:14**

**MS. DELORIS CARTER**

...at work, but what kind of job do you think she's doing?

[ SOUNDBITE OF CHILDREN "HER DUTY" ]

**00:08:18**

**MS. DELORIS CARTER**

She's doing duty, the military. We'll always keep mommy where?

[ SOUNDBITE OF CHILDREN "IN OUR HEARTS" ]

**00:08:24**

**MS. DELORIS CARTER**

In our hearts, we'll always keep mommy in our hearts.

**00:08:27**

**UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE #5**

Hearts, and daddy.

**00:08:28**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

There is little research on how the youngest military children are affected by war, but studies suggest, children with a deployed parent are more likely to develop behavioral and emotional problems. Teacher Kristie Tegtmeier says she's seen children become withdrawn or cry or get angry for no apparent reason.

**00:08:48**

**MS. KRISTIE TEGTMEIER**

One time a child came into the room, just very quiet and said to me, my daddy left and I said, okay. And he looked at me, said, I promise I'll be good, I'll be good. You have to teach them that it is not their fault. Hi Nicole, you laying down for nap? Where's your, your animal?

**00:09:08**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Teachers also work with them on coping techniques, deep breathing, identifying emotions and learning to ask for help.

**00:09:15**

**MS. KRISTIE TEGTMEIER**

Do you remember the card that we wrote and you weren't sure if I was gonna be able to spell daddy? I did though, didn't I? Do you remember what you drew on there?

**00:09:25**

**UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE #6**

Daddy.

**00:09:26**

**MS. KRISTIE TEGTMEIER**

It was daddy. What, where is your daddy?

**00:09:29**

**UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE #6**

Afghanistan.

**00:09:30**

**MS. KRISTIE TEGTMEIER**

Afghanistan. Yeah. Do you like daddy's hugs? Yeah.

**00:09:36**

**UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE #6**

And kisses.

**00:09:37**

**MS. KRISTIE TEGTMEIER**

And kisses.

**00:09:39**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Research shows, there's an uptake in child abuse and neglect during deployments, so teachers are trained to recognize and report such incidents.

**00:09:47**

**MS. KRISTIE TEGTMEIER**

Sometimes the kids will tell you that daddy's really quiet or daddy gets mad at me over little things and you just have to kind of talk to them and say, you know, it isn't you. You know, he's having a bad day.

[SOUNDBITE OF CHILD]

**00:10:01**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

It's 6:00 o'clock in the evening and Marines are striding back into this childcare center to pick up their children.

**00:10:06**

**UNIDENTIFIED MALE #3**

Gabby [sp?], you ready to go home goofball?

**00:10:09**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Marine Jennifer Rialta holds her 11-month-old daughter Persephone close, as they get ready to go home.

**00:10:15**

**LANCE CORPORAL JENNIFER RIALTA**

I love picking her up, it's like the best part of my day, every day.

**00:10:19**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Deborah Phillips of Georgetown University says, the military has shown us, change is possible.

**00:10:24**

**MS. DEBORAH PHILLIPS**

This amazing transformation from a system that was really in serious trouble, to the best childcare system in the country has been referred to as a Cinderella story.

[SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC]

**00:10:42**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

If childcare is Cinderella at the ball, the Department of Defense is the Fairy Godmother, spending more than \$800 million last year on childcare. But it's not clear whether this bounty will continue. Because of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, military spending was at its highest level in 2010. Since then, that amount has steadily decreased. Eileen Huck, with the National Military Family Association is worried cuts will trickle down to childcare centers. And for service members already on long waiting lists for childcare, although stationed far from their extended families, that will make a big difference.

**00:11:21**

**MS. EILEEN HUCK**

If you have a doctor's appointment, you can't ask your sister to come by and watch the kids for a little while, you can't call on grandma, necessarily, to come and babysit.

**00:11:30**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

The military's childcare system has come a long way from the days when it was considered, "the ghetto," of American childcare. The big question, what lies ahead in the next few years and whether the next generation of military children will also be able to attend what are now considered, some of the nation's best centers for our youngest learners.



[SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC]

00:11:57

MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA

After the break, schools that report to the Pentagon, not the Department of Education.

00:12:02

UNIDENTIFIED MALE #4

If you walked into my classroom and you asked, how many of them knew somebody that was either wounded or killed in combat, every hand would go up. You're not going to find that in public school.

00:12:11

MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA

That's just ahead on, "Breaking Ground: Military Children," a production of WAMU in Washington and PRI, Public Radio International. I'm Kavitha Cardoza, we'll be right back.

[INTERMISSION]

[SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC]

00:12:36

MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA

From WAMU in Washington, D.C. and PRI, Public Radio International, this is "Breaking Ground," a documentary series dedicated to unearthing stories you don't hear elsewhere. I'm Kavitha Cardoza. Today we're learning about our nation's military children. We look at how their lives have been shaped by more than a decade of war, punctuated by long separations when their parents deployed. Ten-year-old Isis Langoria [sp?] lives in Fort Bragg in North Carolina. By the way, that sound you hear, is the rustling of tissues.

00:13:09

MS. ISIS LANGORIA

He's the best dad I could ever ask for.

00:13:12

MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA

Isis' father has been deployed twice to Iraq and was gone for three years.

00:13:16

MS. ISIS LANGORIA

My dad has been blown up, shot and it gets me scared that he might not come back.

00:13:22

MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA

And how do you deal with it?

00:13:24

MS. ISIS LANGORIA

Well, on his first deployment, he got -- he came back with this thing we call a Daddy Bear, it's a bear that has his voice recorded in it and every time I miss him, I just press the button and it talks to me and...

00:13:39

MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA

What does it say?

**00:13:40**

**MS. ISIS LANGORIA**

It's just saying how much he loves me and how much he's proud of me in what I've accomplished.

**00:13:45**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Isis says, she missed playing basketball in the yard everyday with him. What about in school?

**00:13:51**

**MS. ISIS LANGORIA**

I try to stay focused on my schoolwork because I know that my -- that's what my dad would want me to do.

**00:13:56**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Most of our countries military children go to public schools but Isis is one of a small percentage of military children who attends schools run by the Department of Defense Education Activity. They're also called DOD schools. There are 180 of them around the world and they serve some 80,000 children. These schools report to the Secretary of Defense rather than the Secretary of Education. They are little known but may have important lessons to teach us.

**00:14:24**

**MS. ISIS LANGORIA**

Then I think that was the only center I wanted to talk to you about.

**00:14:27**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Fort Bragg is one of the largest Army installations in the country. At one of the elementary schools on base, Irwin Intermediate, children have had their parents deploy at least four times, on average, in the past decade. Julie Allen teaches the third grade...

**00:14:42**

**MS. JULIE ALLEN**

And remember on this one, mistakes are proof that you are...

**00:14:46**

**CHILDREN**

Trying.

**00:14:46**

**MS. JULIE ALLEN**

So please make sure that you give it your best go, deal?

**00:14:50**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Allen checks in with her eight-year-old students, as they rotate through different tables, solving math problems. They use blocks, computers, even a board game.

**00:15:01**

**MS. JULIE ALLEN**

And remember you're looking for the largest difference. Can you visualize what a triangle looks like?

**00:15:09**

**UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE #7**

Got it. That's my [unintelligible]

**00:15:11**

**MS. JULIE ALLEN**

Whoo-hoo.

**00:15:13**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Students at DoD schools do very well academically. On the 2013 national assessment of educational progress test, often referred to as the nation's report card, DoD schools did better on average than public schools on both reading and math tests for fourth and eighth graders. And in reading DoD students in both grades score at the same level as the top performing states in the nation.

**00:15:39**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Those results are even more striking when you consider that approximately a third of military children move every year and 45 percent of students in U.S. DoD schools are low income. So how did they do it? Turns out, members of Congress were wondering the same thing so in 2000, they asked Claire Smrekar, an associate professor of public policy and education at Vanderbilt University to investigate. When Smrekar began her research, she expected an easy explanation for the high test scores.

**00:16:11**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Military children have at least one parent who's working, for starters. They also have safe, stable housing and healthcare.

**00:16:19**

**MS. CLAIRE SMREKAR**

And I thought it was going to have to do with kind of a strict governance and we found that there was so much more complexity.

**00:16:25**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Smrekar says DoD school success starts with strong effective teachers.

**00:16:31**

**MS. CLAIRE SMREKAR**

Oh, it's a hard one, huh?

**00:16:33**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

As a journalist who covers urban education, I was surprised that of the 50 teachers at Irwin Intermediate, only one is new. I was even more surprised Julie Allen doesn't consider herself a veteran teacher.

**00:16:46**

**MS. JULIE ALLEN**

I've worked with different student populations, you know, only eight hers.

**00:16:49**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

You've done eight years, which, to me, is, like, a really long time for a teacher.

**00:16:53**

**MS. JULIE ALLEN**

Okay.

**00:16:54**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

But when I meet Allen's colleagues, I learn that a really long time means something completely different in military schools.

**00:17:03**

**MS. JULIE GIVINGS**

My name is Julie Givings [sp?]. I have taught for 19 years.

**00:17:05**

**MS. GRACE MERKEL**

I'm Grace Merkel [sp?]. I have 36 years.

**00:17:07**

**MS. DONNA TRUELOVE**

I'm Donna Truelove [sp?]. This is my 27th year.

**00:17:10**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

A big reason teachers rarely leave the DoD system is because the pay and benefits are much better than in surrounding civilian schools.

**00:17:18**

**MS. DEBORAH BAILEY**

I'm Deborah Bailey. This is my 29th year of teaching and my 17th year at Fort Bragg. If I went back to the county now, I would take over a \$30,000 a year pay cut. It's probably closer to \$40,000.

**00:17:31**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Smrekar says there's a long-term philosophy when it comes to education in these schools.

**00:17:37**

**MS. CLAIRE SMREKAR**

The commitment to the long-term is a clear, distinctive and unusual quality that we don't see in civilian school systems. Part of that is because they are somewhat politically insulated. And they are not subject to the kinds of political whims or rhetorical wars that civilian schools are sometimes subjected to.

**00:17:57**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

At DoD schools the curriculum, textbooks, online resources and graduation requirements are the same, no matter where you live. Next year all military schools will adopt the Common Core standards, making it easier for military children who move every two to three years. Otherwise, Smrekar says, principals operate fairly independently. That kind of autonomy is often compared to how charter schools operate.

**00:18:23**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

But unlike charter schools, military schools have teachers' unions. And union officials and school leadership actually seem to appreciate each other's purpose. Vera Morgan represents 350 teachers on this base.

**00:18:38**

**MS. VERA MORGAN**

It's a great give and take from both of us. They have great people.

**00:18:41** **MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**  
Principal Ginny Breece agrees.

**00:18:42** **MS. GINNY BREECE**  
We do not have an adversarial relationship at all.

**00:18:47** **MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**  
Another reason for the DoD schools' success is the system is well funded. Mary Ellen Cravotta is showing off the library.

**00:18:54** **MS. MARY ELLEN CRAVOTTA**  
I have spent over \$20,000 just this year on books and DVDs. Our resources are unlimited.

**00:19:03** **MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**  
According to one study, students in DoD schools receive nearly 20 percent more funding for each student, compared to public schools. Principal Ginny Breece says there's also more support in terms of personnel.

**00:19:15** **MS. GINNY BREECE**  
I've got two full-time counselors, a full-time nurse, I've got a speech therapist, an occupational therapist. We have 20 percent of kids on special education and we have a lot of resources to support those kids.

**00:19:28** **MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**  
Ginette Pena's husband has served for 22 years in the Army. Their children attend Irwin Intermediate.

**00:19:35** **MS. GINETTE PENA**  
I have a 12-year-old, an 11-year-old and a 9-year-old.

**00:19:38** **MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**  
You've got three boys?

**00:19:39** **MS. GINETTE PENA**  
I do. I have three boys. I do.

**00:19:41** **MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**  
Oh, my God. How...

**00:19:43** **MS. GINETTE PENA**  
It's always a fun day at our house. Every -- as soon as we walk in. I know my husband -- he loves it though. He says he has to stretch before he comes into that house because that's the first thing they do, is jump on him.

**00:19:52** **MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**  
Pena says her husband has had multiple deployments and has missed half of his 12-year-old son's birthdays.

**00:19:58**

**MS. GINETTE PENA**

Well, my son would say his stomach was hurting. And the teacher said he started laying down a lot on the floor. And I said, "Yeah, I don't know why he's doing that." Well, come to find out from the counselors, he was just missing my husband. And he didn't know, I guess, how to say I miss Daddy.

**00:20:13**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Pena says she reassured her son all the time, but...

**00:20:17**

**MS. GINETTE PENA**

As much as we went through it, on a map, this is where Daddy is, you know, he's over the Atlantic Ocean. He's over here. He said, "Daddy's lost." And you know, that broke -- it still hurts because he'll be deploying again.

**00:20:35**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

He's going to be deploying again?

**00:20:36**

**MS. GINETTE PENA**

Yeah, shortly. And it takes a -- it takes a toll on families.

**00:20:45**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Have you told your children about your husband going off again?

**00:20:48**

**MS. GINETTE PENA**

Yes. First thing my son said, "You're going to miss my birthday again, huh?" You know, so he knows. And we try to do what we have to do, make the best of our situation.

[ S O U N D B I T E O F M U S I C ]

**00:21:05**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

She's grateful that as the family prepares for big changes at home her son's school will remain a source of stability in their lives. The same sense of togetherness that Fort Bragg schools have can also be found at Quantico Middle/High School, a Department of Defense school in Virginia. That's where I meet 16-year-olds Destiny Oakley and Malik Rupert [sp?] and 17-year-old Emily Sanborn. We're sitting outside in the sunshine.

**00:21:32**

**MR. MALIK RUPERT**

We're on the Junior ROTC shooting range.

**00:21:35**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

That's the shooting range for members of the Junior Reserved Officers Training Corps. They must see me looked surprised at the bullseye targets and guns around us because Destiny laughs.

**00:21:45**

**MS. DESTINY OAKLEY**

It's part of their grade and they get medals. I would never have thought that schools teach kids how to properly shoot a gun.

**00:21:52**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

There are lots of ways the school is different from a public school. For starters, it's much smaller.

**00:21:57**

**MS. DESTINY OAKLEY**

I came from a public school where my sophomore class was 300 students and now I have 30 in my junior class. And that's a really nice thing about this small school, is that you can make the varsity sports teams, even if you're absolutely awful like me.

**00:22:09**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

What do you think people can learn from military children?

**00:22:12**

**MS. DESTINY OAKLEY**

You may have friends who are not military, who say, "Well, I don't want to go to my grandma's house for Thanksgiving." And it just almost seems like a pain to them. You just think to yourself, maybe you shouldn't take it for granted. I think that's something that maybe military kids understand more, is cherishing every moment that you do have because you don't know what moments you might not have together.

**00:22:32**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

These schools seem to be relatively insulated from some of the most persistent problems facing civilian schools. For example, the black/white achievement gap at DoD schools is significantly lower than the national rate. And in AP exams, black students at these schools outperform their peers nationally. Researcher Claire Smrekar says the reason can be traced back to the 1950s.

**00:22:56**

**MS. CLAIRE SMREKAR**

The military school system was really the first system to racially integrate their schools because they knew they could not have a racially-integrated military if the children of their military members attended racially-segregated schools.

**00:23:12**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

She says while the military culture of racial integration may not be perfect, it still sets higher expectations for everyone. And Smrekar says that's true from the top down. During her research she asked principals...

**00:23:27**

**MS. CLAIRE SMREKAR**

What's your typical attendance for your parent/teacher conferences? And they looked at each other and they said, "Well, 100 percent, of course." Because the military command insures that all military members have time and make time to walk over and talk to their children's teachers.

**00:23:45**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

At Quantico Middle/High School, daily attendance is around 94 percent. Quantico's assistant principal, Daniel Mulhern, says discipline issues in his high school are almost nonexistent.

**00:23:56**

**MR. DANIEL MULHERN**

I had 10 disciplinary concerns this entire year.

**00:24:01**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

According to Mulhern, those include students who came late to school, talked in class, and had a cellphone ring during a lesson. In seven years, there's only been one fight. Why? Principals Johnson and Mulhern say, in the military parents can get into trouble if their children misbehave.

**00:24:17**

**MR. MICHAEL JOHNSON**

The expectations from the command to the military service member is to manage their family.

**00:24:22**

**MR. DANIEL MULHERN**

There's seldom times that I have to call the parents. I always have full support. There's never been a "Well, you're picking on my son or daughter." "We got it, Mr. Mulhern. We'll have a discussion with our son or daughter this evening."

**00:24:34**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

This educational culture, a mix of high expectations, plenty of resources, strong parental involvement and a focus on long-term planning has paid off for DoD schools. But there are changes on the horizon. Recently, as bases built overseas during the Cold War have been closed, more than 40 of these Department of Defense schools have been shuttered. And the majority of the remaining DoD schools need extensive renovation and repair.

**00:25:02**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

The Pentagon has commissioned the RAND Corporation, a think tank, to look at how it can best balance cost and quality at DoD schools in the U.S. Each one will be looked at independently, and while some schools may see no changes, others could be closed or turned into charter schools.

[ SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC ]

**00:25:25**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

The vast majority of our nation's 2 million military children attend public schools. On average, these children can move up to nine times before they graduate high school. And figuring out different rules and different school districts can be awfully confusing.

[ SOUNDBITE OF SCHOOL CHILDREN ]



**00:25:41**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

At Leckie Elementary, a public school in Washington D.C., more than 150 children come from Joint Base Anacostia Bolling, less than two miles away. Daniel Dunham is the school liaison officer for the Washington region, meaning he helps military families navigate the public education system.

**00:25:59**

**MR. DANIEL DUNHAM**

And do you know about the Interstate Compact?

**00:26:01**

**UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE #8**

I don't think so.

**00:26:03**

**MR. DANIEL DUNHAM**

Okay. So let me get you a form.

**00:26:05**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Because military families move so much, most states have signed on to this voluntary compact, which makes certain allowances for active duty families. For example, school districts can waive course requirements for graduation if a student has already taken a similar course in a different state. The compact also promises that special education services will continue when students change schools. And that deadlines for extra-curricular activity tryouts are waived. But often these rules haven't filtered down to the local level, so Dunham is helping to get the word out. He's a former military child himself.

**00:26:39**

**MR. DANIEL DUNHAM**

When I grew up, we didn't have school liaison officers. I can recall having nightmares, even after I started teaching high school, about not graduating. Because, you know, I moved from place to place. I always had this fear that I wouldn't have enough credits and I would have to repeat a year.

**00:26:55**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Barbara Williams is a liaison at the Army base, Red Stone Arsenal, in Alabama. She recalls one student who loved his small rural school, but was transferred to a new public school with nearly 600 students in his grade.

**00:27:09**

**MS. BARBARA WILLIAMS**

He could not make friends. His grades dropped tremendously. He was making A's and B's in his school, to D's and F's in this school.

**00:27:19**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Judy Cromartie is a liaison who helps children transitioning to public schools around Naval Station Mayport, in Jacksonville, Florida.

**00:27:27**

**MS. JUDY CROMARTIE**

I've known high school students to each lunch in the bathroom the first three days they're at school or they just don't eat.

**00:27:34**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Cromartie and other school liaisons pair students with lunch buddies, tutors and after-school activities. And sometimes, Cromartie jokes, she has to solve issues that have nothing to do with education. For example, the local public school district cancelled the bus service because of budget cuts. And students on base had to start walking to school. She says it was only a few blocks.

**00:27:57**

**MS. JUDY CROMARTIE**

However, to get there they would have had to walk by one strip club, walk by another strip club before they got to this middle school. So I called the district office and suggested that maybe 14-year-old boys -- that would not be a good way to start their day. It's just a thought.

**00:28:18**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

It might depend on whether you're the school liaison officer or the 14-year-old boy.

[ S O U N D B I T E O F M U S I C ]

**00:28:31**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Moving so often is exciting for many military children. They get to explore new cultures, learn new languages and make friends all over the world. But it can also be very disruptive. Moving means constantly being the new kid. Fifteen-year-old Emily Budd goes to a public school in New Kent, Va.

**00:28:49**

**MS. EMILY BUDD**

Chloe? Come Chloe. She's my therapy bunny.

**00:28:54**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Emily feeds her pet rabbit, when her little brother pops his head into the bedroom.

**00:28:59**

**MS. EMILY BUDD**

Go see Momma. Thank you. Okay. Ever since I got the rabbit, it's like my room is free territory for anyone. I'm like, no, that's not how it is.

**00:29:10**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Her father is a lieutenant colonel in the Army, and so her large, loving family has spent several years abroad in South Korea, Germany, and, most recently, Armenia. They moved back to the U.S. a year and a half ago and settled in a small, rural community.

**00:29:26**

**MS. EMILY BUDD**

When someone like me comes in, who's been to 23 countries and speaks three other languages, I'm the odd ball out.

**00:29:33**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Emily is learning not to say a lot about her travels, but having to explain herself constantly wore her down.

**00:29:39**

**MS. EMILY BUDD**

It just, like, came on as this wave of resentment, and so I started to cut.

**00:29:44**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Emily would cut or injure herself.

**00:29:46**

**MS. EMILY BUDD**

I got really depressed.

**00:29:48**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

You were 13?

**00:29:49**

**MS. EMILY BUDD**

Um-hum.

**00:29:49**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

And how long did that period go on for?

**00:29:51**

**MS. EMILY BUDD**

It's still going on, actually. I ended up in the hospital January 21st, because I was going to try to kill myself.

**00:29:59**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Emily texted three of her friends and told them she was going to overdose on sleeping pills. To make a long, traumatic story short, she was hospitalized for a week. She's now on the road to recovery. She's in counseling, has made a few friends and pours her heart into writing poetry.

**00:30:17**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

What would have made it better for you?

**00:30:19**

**MS. EMILY BUDD**

An unlimited supply of money so I could buy a plane ticket back whenever I wanted to. I don't know. I mean, back in Europe and in Armenia, like, I had a distinct place. Like, does that make sense? I just knew where I belonged. But then I got to the U.S., none of these people cared about where I'd been. I didn't know how to react. I think that was the biggest part of it, was that nobody understood me.

[SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC]

**00:30:47**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Many military children are resilient, but there are also a lot like Emily in public schools across the U.S. who experience difficulties. Research suggests just having a parent deployed could increase a child's chance of depression, bullying and suicidal thoughts by between 27 and 50 percent above a non-military child. And public schools, which educate the overwhelming majority of military children, have a big role to play in their well-being.

**00:31:15**

**MS. JILL GAITENS**

We have Oceana Naval Air Base, Portsmouth Naval Center, Norfolk Navy Shipyard, Fort Story/Little Creek...

**00:31:21**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

The Virginia Beach City public school system educates 20,000 military children. Jill Gaitens is the director of military support services.

**00:31:29**

**MS. JILL GAITENS**

We're literally surrounded by the military community.

**00:31:32**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Every branch of the military has a presence here. But even with all these children, she says teachers sometimes don't understand that even a simple question like, where are you from, can be confusing to a military child. She gives the example of her own military family.

**00:31:48**

**MS. JILL GAITENS**

I'm from Michigan. My husband's from Wisconsin. I have one son from Arizona, one son from California, one son from Okinawa.

**00:31:56**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Virginia Beach has hired additional counselors, created military mentoring programs and provided more teacher training. Because what happens outside the school affects the children inside. A few months ago there was a helicopter crash into the water just off Virginia Beach.

**00:32:12**

**MS. JILL GAITENS**

There were four service members that passed away that day. For a little while we didn't know the names of those service members, but all of our students knew that a helicopter crashed. Many of our students have fathers that fly in those helicopters and fly in those jets.

[ SOUNDBITE OF HAMMERING ]

**00:32:29**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Seventeen-year-old Christopher Penn, at Ocean Lakes High School in Virginia Beach, is making a mousetrap car and there's a lot of sawing and nails and talk of wheel alignment involved. Christopher wants to do well in the military aptitude test because he wants to specialize in artillery, so his math skills have to be good.

**00:32:48**

**MR. CHRISTOPHER PENN**

I want to serve my country. I've had this idea since the seventh grade.

**00:32:52**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Like many military children, he has family members who have served. His father was in the Army, and Christopher says he can't wait to wear the Marine Corps uniform.

**00:33:01**

**MR. CHRISTOPHER PENN**

I'll feel proud, you know? That uniform looks great. I know my girlfriend will love it.

**00:33:06**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Christopher is pretty open about his military connections, but Gaitens says that's not often the case. Students don't volunteer that information, either because they want to fit in or because they're told not to.

**00:33:18**

**MS. JILL GAITENS**

We have a lot of Special Forces in our community. The children would know not to discuss it. And there's situations where you don't want to tell your child what you do.

**00:33:25**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

The Virginia Beach School system has added a simple box on registration forms that now allows them to track military children in school databases. Mary Keller, president of the Military Child Education Coalition, is pushing for a similar system nationwide.

**00:33:41**

**MS. MARY KELLER**

Everybody can say, "Well, we're military friendly." Great. What does that mean? We are in this black hole of data of understanding, you know, about the children whose parents are serving.

**00:33:53**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Keller says having families check an extra box when they're enrolling doesn't cost money and it helps schools understand where to direct resources. A school that can identify its military children can support them emotionally as well. Ron Avi Astor, a professor at the University of Southern California, has studied the effects of war on children, particularly in the Middle East.

**00:34:16**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

He says there's a chasm between the civilian population and the military in the U.S. that makes many children feel like no one understands them. He contrasts this with Israel, where a large percentage of the population has served.

**00:34:29**

**PROF. RON AVI ASTOR**

In Israel, it's not uncommon for a teacher who might have been an officer, or a bus driver may have served in a combat unit. So the number of adults that are working in schools in the community who understand what war means or what kids may go through is huge.

**00:34:46**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

There are efforts to support military children in public schools happening across the country. A Washington state school pairs students with military mentors for the year, a Virginia school invites service members to talk about their experiences, and in California there are almost 100 school gardens where civilian and military families work together to get to know each other.

**00:35:10**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

But experts say these efforts need to be more intentional and coordinated and scaled up if we want to reach the hundreds of thousands of military children across the U.S. With less than 1 percent of the population serving in the military, there's a cultural divide that needs to be bridged and that isn't just the responsibility of schools.

[ SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC ]

**00:35:36**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Up next, children whose parents have paid the ultimate price.

**00:35:40**

**UNIDENTIFIED CHILD**

When my mom took me to the Army, I saw he was dead and I cried on him.

**00:35:46**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

That's just ahead on "Breaking Ground," a production of WAMU in Washington, D.C. and PRI, Public Radio International. I'm Kavitha Cardoza.

[ SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC ]

**00:36:05**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

From WAMU in Washington, D.C. and PRI, Public Radio International, this is "Breaking Ground," a documentary series dedicated to unearthing stories you don't hear elsewhere. I'm Kavitha Cardoza. Today we've been talking about our nation's military children. And in this segment, we'll hear from a few of the approximately 5,000 who've lost a parent or older sibling in the past decade.

**00:36:31**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

The organization TAP stands for Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors. TAPS holds Good Grief Camps around the country, where young people are taught they're not alone in their sadness. I spent some time at a camp in Philadelphia.

[SOUNDBITE OF CHILDREN AT CAMP]

**00:36:48**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

This could be any room of five to seven-year-olds, until you look at the pictures they're drawing. Six-year-old Grayson Garber is from New York. His father, Richard, was serving in the Navy when he died in 2011.

**00:37:01**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Tell me about your picture.

**00:37:04**

**MR. GRAYSON GARBER**

This is my dad watching TV and this is a graveyard.

**00:37:08**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

He's watching TV in the graveyard?

**00:37:10**

**MR. GRAYSON GARBER**

Yeah.

**00:37:11**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Tell me a little bit about him. I'm never met him.

**00:37:14**

**MR. GRAYSON GARBER**

His name is Richard. He was in the Navy. He got hit by a bomb and also a big missile hit him.

**00:37:23**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Catherine Clark is sitting next to Grayson, furiously coloring with blue around a winged figure. She's five and a half.

**00:37:31**

**MS. CATHERINE CLARK**

My dad's an angel and he's about to swim in Hawaii.

**00:37:36**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Have you been to Hawaii with your dad?

**00:37:38**

**MS. CATHERINE CLARK**

Yes. It was hot.

**00:37:40**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Did he splash you? Yeah?

**00:37:42**

**MS. CATHERINE CLARK**

Yes. He likes to tickle people.

**00:37:46**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

And what would you do?

**00:37:47**

**MS. CATHERINE CLARK**

I would tickle him back.

**00:37:50**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Catherine's father, Kevin, died in Afghanistan in 2012. Dylan Bayless is eight. He's written his name on a bright yellow star. And right next to it is the name David. That's his stepfather who died in combat in Afghanistan in 2009.

**00:38:07**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Can you read what you've written?

**00:38:09**

**MR. DYLAN BAYLESS**

"Dear David, I miss you so much. I want you to come back, please." I really didn't want him to die. And I said, "Don't go out there because you're going to die," and he didn't listen.

[ SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC ]

**00:38:31**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

For teenagers, this TAPS camp can be calming, as they deal with loss during an already difficult age. Fourteen-year-old Madison Cheever says this is the only place she can talk about her dad Rob as much as she wants.

**00:38:44**

**MS. MADISON CHEEVER**

You don't have to worry about, "Oh, what if someone makes fun of me."

**00:38:47**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Just three days after Sgt. 1st Class Robert Cheever returned to the U.S. after his third tour of duty in Afghanistan he had a stroke. When his family was told he wouldn't recover, they moved from an Army base in New York, to Minnesota, where Rob's family lived. His wife, Jill Bailey, says her children's sorrow was compounded by leaving the only home they had ever known.

**00:39:10**

**MS. JILL BAILEY**

Even though we had moved back to the Midwest to our family, they're all civilians. It was culture shock.



**00:39:17**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Rob Cheever died a month later. He was 37. Now, his daughter Madison says she can't relate to other children in school.

**00:39:25**

**MS. MADISON CHEEVER**

They're like, "Oh, yeah, I lost a grandparent." They don't know how it feels to lose someone who would possibly walk you down the aisle someday.

**00:39:35**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Cheever says she's filled two or three journals with letters she's written to her dad because she's sure he reads them.

**00:39:42**

**MS. MADISON CHEEVER**

Because then I still can remember him and he's not slowly fading away and just being a memory.

**00:39:49**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

She says that when they visit his grave, she sits down and talks to him.

**00:39:53**

**MS. MADISON CHEEVER**

Until my mom final says, "We need to go." She says that I'm definitely his child who's always talking and never stops.

[ S O U N D B I T E O F M U S I C ]

**00:40:10**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Back in the children's group, Gracen Gaber is waiting for the next activity to start. I ask about the stress ball he's just made out of balloons and Play-Doh. It's meant to help him cope with anger. Gracen, what do you usually do when you get angry at home, before you had your stress ball.

**00:40:28**

**MR. GRACEN GABER**

Wrestle my brother.

**00:40:31**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

And now what are you going to do?

**00:40:33**

**MR. GRACEN GABER**

I'm going to throw it [unintelligible].

**00:40:35**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

You're going to throw your stress ball at your brother now? I think you're supposed to squeeze it.

**00:40:42**

**MR. GRACEN GABER**

I know.

**00:40:43**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Nice. Vanessa Daley at TAPS listens as children share what they've learned at camp.

**00:40:50** **UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE #1**

Even somebody died in a family, you can still have fun.

**00:40:52** **UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE #2**

You can share your feelings that you never shared with people.

**00:40:57** **MS. VANESSA DALEY**

You guys are really, really brave.

**00:40:59** **MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Daley herself lost her father 11 years ago when he was deployed in Iraq. She wants these children to know there are two paths they can take.

**00:41:09** **MS. VANESSA DALEY**

We can take that grief and you can hold it inside and it can be very negative. I just want the kids to see that there's another road, and that's the road that their parents would want them to take.

**00:41:25** **MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Since the start of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, approximately 3,000 service members have killed themselves. That doesn't include veterans or National Guard and Reserve troops, not on active duty. The Department of Defense now considers suicide among the most important issues facing the military. For children, suicide is extremely difficult to understand. Because they want their loved one to be a hero, as in, how many people did my dad save? Or, did he jump on a bomb to save his buddies? Many blame themselves and feel responsible.

**00:42:02** **MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

80 miles away from the TAPS camp in Joppa, Maryland, seven-year-old Connor Diel is sitting in his basement. He's balancing a large photo album on his lap. His mother Susan says he does this several times a month.

**00:42:15** **MR. CONNOR DIEL**

This is a picture of me. We have a wagon and my dad used to pull me around in it. This is a unicorn that he used to wear.

**00:42:26** **MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Where's that?

**00:42:27** **MR. CONNOR DIEL**

Afghanistan. Whoops, we skipped a page.

**00:42:30** **MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Daddy is Michael Diel, who served in a Special Tactics Unit for the Air Force. Susan says they were both 23 when they met.

**00:42:39**

**MS. SUSAN DIEL**

He would say, just tell people we met at a bar. But I say we met at a Christmas party, because it was at a Christmas party at a bar. But we met that night and the rest was history.

**00:42:48**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

He was a dashing and happy airman who jumped out of planes. She was a gorgeous and kind therapist in private practice. They fell in love instantly. During their nine years as a couple, they were apart a lot because of Michael's job. Deployments to Iraq, Afghanistan, Kosovo and Kuwait, and constant trainings. In 2007, Michael got out of the military and transitioned into civilian life. But it didn't go the way he'd hoped.

**00:43:15**

**MS. SUSAN DIEL**

He was only offered lower paying positions and he had all this special tactics training, but he didn't have a college degree. He thought his skills would be valued more than reality.

**00:43:27**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

At around the same time, he was diagnosed with ADHD and depression. His doctor prescribed a variety of medications, including one he should not have been taking because of his family history of bipolar disorder.

**00:43:41**

**MS. SUSAN DIEL**

He started changing then.

**00:43:43**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

What do you mean, changing?

**00:43:44**

**MS. SUSAN DIEL**

He was very suspicious about everything, made accusations of me that weren't true.

**00:43:51**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

You having affairs.

**00:43:52**

**MS. SUSAN DIEL**

Yeah. All that stuff. And how do you tell somebody who's paranoid that they're paranoid?

[SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC]

**00:44:03**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

One weekend, Susan and their children went to the beach. Michael stayed behind because of work and insisted he was fine, that they go and have fun.

**00:44:12**

**MS. SUSAN DIEL**

And I got a call at four, 4:20 in the morning, saying that he was dead.

**00:44:19**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Michael Diel was 33-years-old. Connor says it's hard sometimes keeping his dad's death a secret. Does your little brother ask you about him?

**00:44:35**

**MR. CONNOR DIEL**

Yes. He asked how he died, but my mom doesn't want me to tell him and I say, oh, mommy doesn't want me to tell you.

**00:44:44**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Did your friends ask you in school what happened?

**00:44:47**

**MR. CONNOR DIEL**

I told my friends that he died, but I didn't tell them how he died, because it was too violent. Do I tell you, like, how he died?

**00:44:58**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

You can if you want.

**00:44:59**

**MR. CONNOR DIEL**

He died because, like, his brain got messed up and he got mad a lot. And he accident -- when, how he died, he accidentally shot himself.

**00:45:14**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

I see Susan shaking her head, but Connor continues talking. He says when he thinks about his dad, sometimes he's happy, sometimes he's sad. And sometimes he's angry.

**00:45:26**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

What do you feel angry about?

**00:45:27**

**MR. CONNOR DIEL**

That he's not here and I'm angry because that I can't play with him.

**00:45:34**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Susan says dealing with questions from Connor was the most difficult. And there were many questions.

**00:45:40**

**MS. SUSAN DIEL**

But how did he die? And I gritted my teeth, you know, and basically said, he took his own life. But how? And I said, with a gun. And he looked at me and he goes, he shot himself? Why? And I said, I don't know. I kind of explained that he had something wrong with his brain. You know, the fact that he said to you that it was accidental. He knows that it's not. Michael was an excellent marksman. He knew how to handle a weapon. There was nothing accidental about it.

**00:46:12**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

That's just his way of...

00:46:15 MS. SUSAN DIEL  
Coping, I think. Yeah.

[SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC]

00:46:20 MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA  
Since Michael died, Connor has begun sucking his thumb again and become more anxious.

00:46:24 MS. SUSAN DIEL  
Because we went to the beach. In their little minds, everything was fine. And we come home and daddy's gone. That doesn't make any sense to anybody.

00:46:40 MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA  
Connor is taking me through a closet door that opens into a smaller door and you crawl through it into a tiny little room his father built for him.

00:46:48 MR. CONNOR DIEL  
This is my four that he made. It's very small.

00:46:53 MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA  
I don't know whether I can fit in here. Oh my gosh. You flip a switch and little stars come on. There are maps from Afghanistan pinned on the walls and a pint sized cabinet where Connor keeps his prized possessions.

00:47:05 MR. CONNOR DIEL  
My dad gave some of his stuff that he used to use for work.

00:47:10 MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA  
What's that?

00:47:10 MR. CONNOR DIEL  
This is a little pouch. He wrote Diel on it.

00:47:13 MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA  
Cool. I love how he had written his last name on the pouch and that's your last name, too.

00:47:20 MR. CONNOR DIEL  
Yeah.

00:47:20 MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA  
Connor's eyes sparkle with pride as he points out his father's helmet and books and citations.

00:47:27 MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA  
I've never met your dad, right? And people are going to listen to this and they've never met your dad. So, if you had to explain who your dad was, how would do that?

**00:47:37**

**MR. CONNOR DIEL**

He's very nice and no matter what, he has time to play with me. He would tell jokes and he would sometimes make funny faces.

**00:47:49**

**MS. SUSAN DIEL**

He had a whole, I would say 32 and a half really good years. And I don't want him to be remembered for the last moment in his life.

[SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC]

**00:48:00**

**MS. SUSAN DIEL**

I said daddy would be very proud of you. Right?

**00:48:02**

**MR. CONNOR DIEL**

Yeah. He was an angel.

**00:48:04**

**MS. SUSAN DIEL**

He is an angel. Right.

**00:48:08**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

As Susan Diel cuddles Connor on the front porch of her house, she tries not to think of the many memories Michael won't be there to make with their sons. She's just got engaged and is trying to make way for future memories with her fiancée. It's a difficult balance.

**00:48:23**

**MS. SUSAN DIEL**

When we're just driving along and it's a perfectly good day, and you get asked, why isn't daddy still here? It breaks your heart. But, some days, it's a beautiful day out, and you just get to smile and live and be good. So it just depends on the day. Today's a good day.

**00:48:47**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Our nation's two million military children are bearing a big burden. They've seen their parents head overseas and sometimes get hurt or killed. They've wallowed in silence and sometimes have grieved alone. All of that takes a toll. We see so often that these children are resilient. But I wonder if that's just a way to let ourselves off the hook for what we owe these kids. I started thinking of their sacrifices and the unpredictable nature of their lives. And I realized that even though they didn't sign up, these children have served, too.

**00:49:21**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

Perhaps we should start by saying to them, as well as their parents, thank you for your service. You've been listening to "Breaking Ground: Military Children." Our editors are Tara Boyle and Deborah George. Special thanks to Meymo Lyons, Cavin Munson, Mark McDonald and Carrie Needon. Also to Chris Chester, Carrie Moscow, Kathleen Allenbough and the rest of the digital and marketing team. Also thanks to Noel Gumper and Robin Kayla, along with Liam Sullivan, Julie Alderman, and Andrew Katsmosis.

**00:49:57**

**MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA**

**Special thanks to PRI's Kathy Merrit and Vadal Guzman. For more of our reporting on military children, along with video, slide shows and resources on how to help, visit our website, [breakingground.wamu.org](http://breakingground.wamu.org). You can also share your story on Twitter @kavithacardoza. Thanks for listening. I'm Kavitha Cardoza.**