

The Kids Are All Right

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By Grace Marvin

At 7:15 a.m. on most Thursday mornings, you'll find Bonnie Ard elbow-deep in glitter leading a craft project at Sallas Mahone Elementary School in Valdosta, Ga. Her audience? The children of the Scott Craven Mentoring Program, a breakfast club for students who have one or two parents deployed in the military.

Ard is now the front office receptionist at Sallas Mahone, but when she started the program she was a PTO mom looking for a way to help.

"There was a little girl in my son's kindergarten class who had both her parents deployed," Ard recalled. "I could not fathom. She was five years old, and I thought we had to come up with something to help her."

Ard spearheaded a partnership with Moody Air Force Base to begin a lunch buddy program. Each child of deployed parents was matched with a mentor from the base to eat lunch with them once a week.

"When a parent is deployed, we sometimes notice a change in behavior," Principal Gary Glover said. "The program helps them feel less alone. They realize they aren't the only kid with a parent deployed."

Scott Craven, an instructor pilot assigned to the 3rd Flying Squadron at Moody was one of nine pilots who first volunteered to mentor students at Sallas Mahone. Craven passed away in a car accident in 2006 while he was a mentor. The day he was killed, the program was renamed in his honor.

Ard remembers Craven for his dedication and great personality.

"Scott was the only mentor who mentored two lunch buddies," Ard said. "He took it seriously and never missed a lunch."

Robert and Linda Craven of Bensalem, Pa., recall the enthusiasm their late son had for the program.

"He used to get very excited when he talked about the kids," Robert said. "Knowing that he was helping them, having an impact." And what an impact the program has had.

(Below) Bonnie Ard leads the group during a homecoming ceremony celebrating an airman's return from deployment. Air Force photos by Staff Sgt. Ceaira Tinsley.



Ja’Niayah Ellis, 12, participated in the Scott Craven Mentoring Program when she attended Sallas Mahone. Ellis was one year old when her father, Staff Sgt. James Darren Ellis, was killed in Afghanistan. Now in eighth grade, Ellis returns frequently to the breakfast club.

“It feels amazing that I started in Scott Craven as a little kid and as a member of the program and now I am talking in front of kids that are part of it,” Ellis said.

Ja’Niayah’s mother has seen her daughter grow because of her experience in the program. “She has been able to share her journey, and the kids in Scott Craven understand her story,” Ulrica Ellis said. “I am very proud of her.”

Ard credits the school’s partnership with the Craven family as a key to sustaining the program.

“Scott’s family raises money every year through a golf tournament. That is how we are able to fund the crafts and breakfast,” she said. “Partnering with the Cravens has driven us to make this program what it is today.”

The program has evolved since it began, allowing it to sustain its success. The one-on-one

mentoring session structure was adjusted into a group session when Ard and others discovered that students benefited from interacting directly.

Robert Craven smiled imagining his son's reaction if he'd known the program was renamed for him.

"Scott and I had a very unique relationship," he said. "If he was here, that conversation would start with, 'Dude, can you believe this?'"

"It's very rewarding," Scott's mother Linda said. "Comforting to know he has a legacy."
