

A HOME



Since 2017, a program welcoming Fort Riley soldiers to the region forges strong bonds between the civilian and military communities in greater Junction City, Kansas.

By Grace Marvin

Phyllis Fitzgerald was the mayor of Junction City when she decided that something more needed to be done to make soldiers stationed at nearby Fort Riley feel welcomed. She focused her efforts on younger soldiers because after nearly 42 years, Fitzgerald still remembers what it is like to arrive at your first duty station.

“Being a retired soldier myself who went in at the young age of 17, that was my first time away from home,” Fitzgerald says. “It can be a little bit scary out there. But there are a lot of communities that are willing to really open their doors and their hearts to these young soldiers, and I think it really makes a difference.”

Fitzgerald researched what other defense communities had done to acclimate service members to their new assignments and discovered the “adopt-a-family” concept.

She worked with Fort Riley to adapt the concept. In December 2017, the Team Flint Hills Home Away from Home, “Adopt A Soldier” program was born.

Community and base leaders mask up and stand behind a sign at Fort Riley. From left to right, Col. Will McKannay, Garrison Commander; Nate Butler, MAC chairman; Craig Bender, MAC Director; Allen Dinkel, Junction City Manager; CSM Timothy Speichert. Photo courtesy of Fort Riley

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“Our goal was to find ways to get soldiers out of barracks, out of the gates of Fort Riley and into our community,” Fitzgerald says. “The program matches local families with a soldier to host. Maybe they invite them over to dinner or go to church together. What is great about it is that the family benefits as well. They learn more about our military through their soldier.”

Since then, over 172 soldiers have been matched with local families. One of those soldiers is Jeremy Folkerts, who was matched with the Bender family in November 2019. Folkerts was an officer when he started in Home Away from Home. What he sought to get out of the program was a bit different than other soldiers.

“I’m not really that much of a social person, so I was looking for some way to connect with like-minded people,” Folkerts says. “For me personally I was looking for that connection and sense of family time

even though I was away from my own family. For younger soldiers, it’s a hot meal. A place to stay that is not the barracks.”

The Benders have hosted multiple Fort Riley soldiers over the years, and their adopted service members often end up feeling like extended family.

“We’ve had our soldiers out to local baseball games, out on the boat, for cookouts, for dinner and for Christmas,” says Craig Bender, Military Affairs Council Director for the Junction City Area Chamber of Commerce. “It is really just a matter of how much a family or a soldier wants to be involved. It may be a phone call once a month or maybe they are at your house every weekend. We’ve been lucky to see ours a couple times a month.”

Craig and his wife Karen even helped Folkerts and his fiancé Shelby coordinate their virtual wedding ceremony at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“They needed two witnesses, so they asked, ‘Hey Craig and Karen, would you two be willing to be witnesses to our wedding?’ and we said of course,” Bender says.

“I don’t know what we would have done if the Benders hadn’t been there to be our witnesses,” Folkerts adds.

Parents of soldiers have expressed to Fitzgerald how comforting it is to know that their child has an additional support system in place while stationed at Fort Riley.

Fitzgerald says communities that want to start a similar program of their own should know it takes dedication.

“You must promote it,” she says. “I use social media and work with the fort to brief new soldiers about the program. The fort is very helpful in that every soldier hears about it when they process in. The program stays alive because I keep it alive.” 📧

1 Home Away from Home founder Phyllis Fitzgerald (center) during her promotion ceremony to Chief Warrant Officer 2 at Fort Riley in 1992. Photo provided by Phyllis Fitzgerald **2** Jeremy Folkerts and his wife Shelby pose on their wedding day. His Home Away from Home family helped the couple plan their ceremony. Photo provided by Jeremy Folkerts **3** Craig Bender (left) poses with his soldiers, Jeremy Folkerts and Nathaniel Davis, at a socially distanced gathering during the COVID-19 pandemic. Photo provided by Craig Bender

