

## A Gold Star Mom “Jogs” Her Memory

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Most people do not understand at all why a person would want to run 26.2 miles. Even fewer understand running more than one marathon. My son, Joel, was one of the few people in my circle who truly understood why I would run—at this point—over 25 marathons. Perhaps it is because he is my son; perhaps it is because he, too, ran several marathons in his very short life. I think it is mostly because we have both done our best when working towards a goal.



Joel wanted to take karate in second grade. By fifth grade, he was a black belt. After three years of being a “physics geek” in high school, he decided to “be a jock” his senior year and earned a varsity letter in cross country, swimming and tennis. Later, at Purdue University, he was voted “Warrior Spirit” (basically top cadet) by his fellow Air Force ROTC cadets four years in a row. He was the first ROTC cadet to be accepted into the Combat Rescue Officer training course, the pipeline of which is often referred to as “superman school.” He loved the challenges he faced and the men he faced those challenges with. He also met the love of his life at Purdue University. It was as if he knew his time was limited—they married a year after graduating.

Joel did not wait to be told what to do; he simply did it. There was never fanfare, and certainly never bragging. He was humble about his many accomplishments. He was driven, and he knew how to have an absolute blast.

When raising my kids I would remind them of something my dad taught me. He would say, “At the end of the day there is only one person you are accountable to, and you look at that person at night when you brush your teeth.”

Every day is an opportunity to serve others, to help out, to do what's right, to do your best, to be an example, to be a leader and to learn something new. Joel did just that. While at Purdue, he visited veterans at a veterans' home. While deployed as a Combat Rescue Officer in Afghanistan, he arranged for stuffed animals to be shipped to the forward operating base so that on a rescue mission, the crews could help the Afghan children be less afraid. Sadly, he was never able to deliver the stuffed animals.

My son, Captain Joel Gentz, was killed in action on June 9, 2010, in Helmand Province, Afghanistan. His team, "Pedro 66," was called on their second rescue mission of the morning to pick up a British Marine who had been shot in the leg. As Pedro 66 approached the landing zone, it was hit by a rocket-propelled grenade which destroyed the tail rotor. The helicopter could not immediately land because there were troops on the ground and civilian houses nearby, so the co-pilot veered away to protect the troops and civilians, and in doing so, crash landed. Joel and three other crew members were killed on impact. The pilot died about one month later from his injuries. The co-pilot and gunner survived with life-changing injuries.



Joel's "bird," the Pave Hawk HH-60, is the same type of helicopter featured on the Air Force Marathon finisher medal this year. When I saw that, I knew I had to run the race for Joel. I plan to place the finisher medal into Joel's flag box which contains the folded flag that was draped on Joel's casket, three bullet casings from his 21 gun salute, his medals, his rank, the memorial patches from the Pedro 66 crew members lost, and other memorabilia that is near and dear to my heart. It will be part of Joel's legacy and a family heirloom.

I'm also running the race in support of **That Others May Live Foundation** because I know how much they help children of the fallen in the Pararescue field and Pararescuemen with both visible and invisible injuries. The men and families who survived the Pedro 66 crash will benefit from my fundraising, and that means a lot to me. I am 100 percent sure that Joel would want me to never forget those two men and their families just as they never forgot their fallen comrades.

Joel and I loved to run together when we could, but I initially began running to have some "me time" when my children were small. It was free and I could fit it into my day, usually before the kids even woke up. As I aged, running was my way of burning calories so I could indulge a little. Joel was my best

cheerleader, and one of my happiest memories is of the day we ran the Boston Marathon together, him finishing an hour ahead of me! He understood why I kept going after that first marathon. I know that he'd understand why I am still running today.

Pounding the dirt roads helps clear my head and my soul. It is my "God and me" time now. It's when I think about my beautiful boy who grew up to be a wonderful man. I wonder what he'd be like now, ten years later. Sometimes I cry. Sometimes I simply shake my head in nagging disbelief that he's gone. Sometimes I feel his presence out there in the middle of nowhere, especially during a long run.



Joel left this world at 25 years old, but his character was such that he influenced many people in positive ways, and that will always live on. The Pararescue motto is "These Things We Do, That Others May Live." This motto speaks to the selfless nature of the Pararescue job field. It is similar to a Bible verse that holds special meaning to me, "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends," John 15:13.

Joel's memory inspires others every day. He would love to know that he was a positive influence. He saved 39 lives in Afghanistan during his 6 weeks of deployment, and I truly believe that as an angel, he has saved thousands. Joel continues to do what he loved and what he was called to do. And that makes me smile.