

A HEALING JOURNEY

BY CAROL MOCZYGEMBA

Ivan Peña was a wide-eyed, sweet-natured 5-year-old when his dad, U.S. Army Sgt. Roger Peña Jr., was deployed to Afghanistan in January 2006. Peña promised Ivan he would take him and his little brother, Gabriel, to Disney World in Florida when he came back to the States in November for a scheduled leave. It was hard to say goodbye, but the promise of going to Disney World with his family gave Ivan something to hold on to.

Roger Peña, a charismatic, handsome man with intense brown eyes and a legendary comic streak, enlisted in the Army in 2004 because he saw military service as an opportunity to assure a good future for his family. “He wanted the kids to have everything, to have security,” said his wife, Marisol, whose parents, José and Sandra Gomez, are members of Magic Valley Electric Cooperative.

Peña, a champion chess player in his youth, was a natural athlete and devoted husband, father, son, brother and friend—all traits well suited to his work as a combat medic. Peña had some notion of the dangers he would face, and he wanted to protect his family from worry. So he urged Marisol and the children to live in San Antonio with his parents during his tour of duty. There, Marisol resumed her studies in bilingual education, Ivan joined a swimming class, and baby Gabriel grew into a spunky toddler. As much as possible, they carried on without Peña, counting the days until his return.

Marisol remembers June 13, 2006, as the day “my whole world crumbled.” The two men in Army dress uniforms who came to talk with her didn’t have to say anything. The moment she realized what was happening, it was as if she had been struck by lightning. Peña had been killed when his convoy came

under fire during combat in Musa Qulah, Afghanistan.

Grief-stricken, unmoored and lost, Marisol returned to her hometown of Mission, where her parents and siblings lived. Unable to plan for the future or escape her ever-present sorrow, she turned her focus to Ivan and Gabriel. How could she help them through this numbing and confusing time? She remembered her husband’s promise to take Ivan to Disney World, a promise now wrapped in heartache. Marisol, who wanted to learn everything she could about grieving children who have lost a parent in the military, began scouring the Internet for information.

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That’s when she came upon the website for Snowball Express.

“It was too good to be true,” Marisol said. “A free trip to Disneyland for kids of fallen soldiers.” She checked it out further. It was true. Snowball Express, a national, nonprofit program, offered an all-expenses-paid trip to Disneyland in Anaheim, California, for children and spouses of soldiers who died in military service after 9/11. Maybe it wasn’t exactly Disney World, but it was Disney. And Ivan was just as happy for the chance to see Mickey Mouse in California as in Florida.

Retired U.S. Air Force Lt. Col. Roy

White, a member of CoServ Electric, is chairman of the board for Snowball Express. He’s been part of the program since it began in early 2006 as a modest Rotary Club project. As a captain with Southwest Airlines, White managed to persuade the airlines and the pilots union to underwrite more than 100 tickets to get Snowball Express off the ground. “It was all put together with baling wire and lots of other loose ends,” White remembers. A website was created inviting eligible families to come aboard the Snowball Express. “The families showed great courage,” White said. “All they got was a phone call and a couple of e-mails. It was all grassroots, no formal budget and no major media.”

That first year, nearly 900 children and parents from as far away as Australia and Japan and all across the United States, including Marisol and Ivan Peña, were guests of Snowball Express, so named because it takes place around the December holidays. “The families had a great time,” White said. “It was amazing the healing that went on, just with children coming together, healing together, for the first time ever.”

Marisol recalled telling Ivan that even though his dad couldn’t take him to Disney World, they could go to Disneyland instead. “His face lit up



Gabriel and Ivan share memories of their Snowball Express trip to Disneyland last year.

SNOWBALL EXPRESS

Nearly 1,600 attendees are expected to be part of the 2008 Snowball Express experience. American Airlines, in partnership with BP North America, will commission six chartered aircraft to bring 1,000 children and surviving spouses from 19 U.S. cities to the event. American Airlines has also committed to flying 30 attendees from overseas, making the Snowball Express contribution the largest single donation of its kind in the airline's history. Transportation support continues, as well, from Southwest, Airtran and Jet Blue airlines. In addition, hotels in Orange County, California, will donate nearly \$1 million worth of accommodations.

Registration is closed for 2008, but open for 2009. Plans for 2009 are to bring the families to Dallas/Fort Worth for, among other possibilities, a Dallas Cowboys game, a trip to Six Flags over Texas and Dallas Motor Speedway. Snowball Express recently received recognition and a \$5,000 grant at the 2008 Newman's Own Awards ceremony held at the Pentagon to recognize the top 15 home-front organizations making contributions to military quality of life.

For information about Snowball Express and letters from past participants, go to www.snowballexpress.org.



Ivan, Marisol and Gabriel Peña honor the memory of husband and father, Sgt. Roger Peña, with photos, medals of commendation and other mementos in every room of their home.

with a big smile,” she said. “That smile was worth everything to me.”

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For Marisol, the trip was more than the fulfillment of Ivan’s Disney dream. It was a small step toward coming to terms with her husband’s death. Surrounded by spouses with similar stories, she felt understood. She wasn’t alone in her struggle to work through her own grief while staying strong for her children. “When Ivan cries that he wishes his father was here, I feel so helpless,” she said. “Sometimes I think it’s all a big mistake, that one day Roger will walk through that door.” She didn’t

have to explain any of that to her Snowball Express companions. Neither did Ivan.

But early in 2007, Snowball Express faced some major challenges. White explained that the volunteer coalition of people and businesses that got the project off the ground had been too loosely organized to guarantee its future. “We’ve got to find a way to keep this going,” he remembers thinking. “There’s too much healing going on to let it go.” So he and a handful of other supporters got to work. “We found some kindred spirits, and when people heard it would continue, we got more corporate spon-

sors. We reorganized and made it simpler.” With just eight weeks to go before Snowball Express 2007 was supposed to take place, the organization faced a shortfall of \$500,000 for airline tickets and other expenses.

Then, almost miraculously, Capt. Jim Palmersheim, an American Airlines pilot, persuaded the airline to donate 500 tickets—three chartered airplanes—to something they had learned about only two weeks earlier. “The cause was what drew them,” White said. On a smaller scale, it also drew Air Tran Airways and Jet Blue. “We had a generous change of fortune,” White said.

Marisol didn’t expect to be eligible for another Snowball Express experience, but she was invited to come back for the 2007 trip. “That time, all three of us went,” she said, “and it was so much better because we were together.” Ivan and Gabriel get animated when they look through their Snowball Express scrapbook, remembering breakfast with Minnie Mouse, holding hands with Goofy and walking down Main Street with Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck. And then there’s “that blue guy from Winnie the Pooh,” as Gabriel refers to Eeyore.

Huddled together on the sofa, their legs draped with a Disneyland blanket, the boys get a gleam in their eyes when Marisol reminds them that they will be part of the Snowball Express family again this year. “To see those little eyes sparkle and that big, excited smile on their faces is something that I am very thankful to the Snowball team for,” she says. “They do this from the bottom of their hearts, and it shows that there are caring people out there who do not forget the great sacrifice these families have made.”

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TAPS

More than 4,200 families, encompassing more than 8,500 children, have lost military members in combat or in training since September 11, 2001. Studies have shown that the children of these fallen soldiers are particularly susceptible to anxiety and depression.

Among the organizations offering support is the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS), a community of families who have lost a loved one in military service and volunteer their time to support newly bereaved children and spouses. TAPS sponsors “Good Grief Camps,” a healing experience for children. In 2007 one of the camps was held in Salado, near Fort Hood. Many of the services provided by TAPS are free of charge to surviving families and are made possible by the generosity of donors. For information about TAPS programs, go to www.taps.org.