Today on across the fence we will meet the proud and patriotic hometown heroes who stand behind our military servicemen and women. They are the blue star mothers of Vermont. Good afternoon and thanks for joining us I am Judy Simpson. As an organization blue star mothers does a lot of things from providing support to active military personnel to assisting veteran organizations. As individuals blue star mothers are the proud matriarchs of those who serve or have served honorably in our military. This afternoon we're going to meet two blue star mothers of Vermont as we find out more about the organization and individuals. I want to welcome Valerie Palotta of Colchester who is the chapter president of blue star mothers of Vermont and Beni Twitchell who's the chapter vice president. Val, let's start out by talking about blue star mothers the national organization?

Valerie.: Yes the national organization was founded in 1942 and congressionally chartered in 1960. They're the proud mother is as you said of military children who have served honorably for our country.

Beni.: Or who are currently serving.

Judy.: How did you get involved with blue star mothers?

Valerie.: In 2009 my son Josh came home and said mom I'm very thankful of what our troops of Don and I want to give back some joining the Vermont army National Guard. After my jaw dropped with shock I was very proud and appreciate if of where he's come and through the Vermont National Guard parent network which supports all parents of all branches of the military whether your child is deployed or not. I met a few other mothers who are going through the same thing that were going through.

Judy.: There are some pictures here.
Valerie.: This is my son Josh coming home actually in December. It was a year deployment for him. He went to basic training in September of 2009 and after basic training had two weeks off and when right to Afghanistan. That's his unit in Afghanistan.

Judy.: And Benny your son joined the army National Guard?

Beni.: Correct he joined in 2005 is you're a year of high school and as he was entering his fifth year was as deployment to Afghanistan. He was interested in building a career with the Federal gov't and new that an infantry background would be a benefit to him that was his motivating factor. That's my son and one of his squad Fitch Mccullough.

Judy.: Tell me a little bit about what your reaction was when your son told you that's what it wants to do?

Beni: I was very proud very nervous because of that time we knew that the troops were probably going to be deployed so I was very anxious about would he be part is that? I'm very proud of what all of them have accomplished and what they continue to do.

Judy.: Let's go back and talk about the blue star mothers. What led you to charter the first Vermont chapter?

Valerie.: I think as moms through the parent network we as moms got together and thought we like having a support group for the mental and emotional support but we really want to get back. We knew that mothers of soldiers who were deployed between 18 and 25 we were experiencing a lot of different things that were not unique to what spouses were dealing with. For us we had a core group of five mothers who sons were all deployed the same time and we just want to give back. We wanted a productive results oriented organization. I did a lot of research and found that blue star mothers of America I was one of the organizations that is a veteran service organization. They honor those who serve they support and advocate veterans for veterans in our troops. And they support the families of our fallen soldiers. One of the other things that intrigued us about blue star mothers of America was the money we raise in Vermont stays in Vermont. Which is very intriguing for us because we're such a small state with such a small network of members that spend a lot of time fund raising if we're making money we really want it say in Vermont to support our Vermont veterans.

Judy.: So what kind of programs are supported through the money that you raise?

Beni.: Currently what we're doing we're so new and so small that once a month we cook at this transitional housing in Winooski canal street housing. It's a two year program for that trends to enroll in its substance free. That was our first initial connection to be able to go cooking with them once a month. We fill their community covered when we go so that there's always something there. We're hoping to branch out and reach out to other that
trains housing and be able to do things there. We're really starting small but hoping to grow.

Valerie.: I think the other thing we like about canal street veteran housing is that the residents are from all war eras. They are from Vietnam to the most recent Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts.

Judy.: Amazing. Do we know how many veterans there are in the state of Vermont?

Valerie.: The department of veteran affairs the latest statistics that I've seen are as stating that about 52,080 veterans are in the state of Vermont. On any given night approximately 125 veterans are homeless. this map that we're looking at is a map of Vermont National Guard soldiers who recently deployed and what I like to show about this is that it expands the whole state of Vermont. You see 1 to 10 in way up Northern Vermont Keenen and Southern Vermont. The thing I like to express about that is that this is just the National Guard this doesn't include all the veterans in other branches of the military.

Judy.: As a matter of fact you're very interested in reaching out to these people too?

Valerie.: We are we're very interested in reaching out to the whole state of Vermont because there are 52,000 veterans in the state of Vermont. We really need to find a way to support them. Homelessness is one of the things we really want to commit our chapter to focus on in preventing homelessness and working with veteran organizations to provide assistance with transitional housing in all areas of the state. There are veteran housing units in Rutland Bennington.

Judy.: How can the broader community support our veterans and boost our mothers of Vermont.

Valerie.: I think one of the ways that the broader community can support is through being compassionate and conscientious when you are meeting a veteran. If you don't know a person is a veteran being aware of the invisible wound that the governments and mental health practitioners talk about now posttraumatic stress is not considered a disorder anymore it's considered posttraumatic stress. Being aware that when you are encountering somebody who might be a little bit more agitated or angry you might be needing a veteran who has spent the year in combat always been on edge. But providing non perishable food items we can set up a collection site for you to donate. Donating money to blue star mothers of Vermont hosting there's.

Beni.: If your business and are willing to let us put one of our donation jars at your business. Fundraisers the dinners calcutta's any opportunities for us to be able to raise money to put more back into the veteran housing.
Judy.: You mentioned that you have a meeting the third Sunday of every month in Colchester and you say it's a great experience because the veterans are so appreciative if of what you do.

Valerie.: They are. We encountered veterans Beni and I will be meeting once a week twice week to just plan what we're going to do and will meet at the American legion and people often say what you two doing you're not supposed to be working and we say we're blue star mothers of Vermont's and we tell them what we do they say thank you for what you're doing and it's just amazing the support that we've had. We go to a lot of events. To go to the guardalia ribbon event promoting our organization. I was at the research homecoming veterans research expo in white river junction last Friday. I had a table there and I met a lot of veterans there and networked with a lot of other organizations to say hey we're here in Vermont and we're here to help and we're going to make a mark.

Judy.: Who can join blue star mothers and what's the process to join the Vermont chapter?

Valerie.: Anybody can join blue star mothers. A blue star mother is the only person who can be an officer only mothers in the officers but a mom a stepmother of a child's who has served in the military or has been honorably discharged in all branches of military. This is one of our moms one of our chartering mothers Phyllis Perot her son Jamie is in the U.S. Army. Is currently deployed in Afghanistan. We have dads too. This is one of our chartering members Kathy Baker and her son Corey Taft and her mother. Corey's dad is an associate member. We have sisters and brothers and sister and laws who can join and the web site is WWW.blue star mothers.org. Currently you can go on there and click on the join now button in the chapter is VT1 Vermont one.

Judy.: I guess I was surprised to learn that this is the first chapter.

Valerie.: It is the first chapter. It's amazing to us that nobody's ever chartered a chapter in Vermont. I know a few people have tried to start one of few years ago and it's a challenging process. Were nonprofit organization we're subordinate of the national organization but we have to follow requirements. I think with the vast number of deployed soldiers currently I think that's why there's more of an interest now and starting it. We are chartering members and are very passionate and committed to supporting our veterans and we have a lot of energy.

Beni.: We have a lot of energy.

Valerie.: We want to make it happen.

Judy.: You mentioned Val that your son is home. Beni is your son back as well?
Beni.: Yes.

Judy.: Is it easier for hard are now that they're back? I suppose it when they're away and deployed messages thinking of and you devote her to blue star mothers but now you're home do you feel that same sense of urgency?

Valerie.: I think I'm more worried now that my son is home. I say more worried I don't know if you can compare that two. My son is in that demographic of the 18 to 25 year olds not only is he dealing with being 22 and going through what a 22 year old goes through but he's also dealing with what he's seen and what he's done it combat. An infantry soldier is a very tough job it's a very tough job. I think it's harder or as hard for us as mom's it's hard for us to let go and I think one of the reasons why we want to start this chapter was because we could still help our sons without them really thinking we were helping them.

Judy.: What are some of the challenges you have encountered?

Beni.: As far as the boys coming home whereas blue star?

Judy.: Both.

Beni.: I think our biggest challenge with blue star mothers is that it's hard to be able to reach out to the Marines and Air Force army coast guard merchant marine it's very easy for us to reach out to the guard because were already in vouched with them. Be able to connect with those other organizations I think is our biggest challenge. That and raising money to be able to expand on what we can do.

Valerie.: I think we have so many organizations trying to raise money currently for of us we know that the Vermont charitable foundation is raising money and the Vermont soldier's angels. We didn't want to compete with that. Soldiers angels is providing support for troops overseas we want to really focus on supporting veterans and supporting transitional housing from urgency support programs single soldier programs homes for our troops things that's organizations.

Beni.: Warrior wellness.

Valerie.: Warrior wellness things that organizations in the state of Vermont are not doing we don't want to compete with the lack of funds during this emotional or financial economic struggles that people are having we want to make sure that every dollar counts so fund raising has been challenging. And increasing our membership but then we sit back and think we just chartered in February when we're not doing too bad.
Judy.: If people want to get in touch with you or find out more about your organization what should they do?

Valerie.: They can go to WWW.blue star mothers.org our mailing address is in Bakersfield it's Po Box 195 Bakersfield VT 05441 or they can e-mail me at aroma blessings at yahoo.com or call 951 1790. We also encourage anybody to attend our meetings on the third Sunday of every month at the American legion 3650 Roosevelt highway in Colchester. We start with the meet and greet potluck at 130 and then we meet doing business and 2.

Beni.: And the meeting usually ends by four.

Judy.: I want to thank you both for coming on and talking about your organization it's very exciting.

Valerie.: Thank you thank you for having us

Beni: Thank you

Judy.: That's our program for today I'm Judy Simpson we will see you again next time on across the fence.

Across the fence is brought to you as a public service by the University of Vermont and WCAX TV