

A GOLDEN MOMENT FOR THE GOLDINGS

Soldier dad's homecoming a pre-game surprise



Virginia Army National Guard Sgt. Michael Golding, appearing on field as Spotsy High's school mascot, waits to reveal himself to his daughters.



PHOTOS BY PETER CIHELKA / THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Sgt. Michael Golding, who had been deployed to Jordan for nearly a year, hugs daughters Harmony (left) and Trinity after a surprise homecoming before a junior varsity soccer game at Spotsylvania High School on Tuesday evening.

BY CATHY DYSON
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Army Sgt. Michael Golding doesn't usually dress like a knight in shining armor, but he swapped uniforms for a few minutes Tuesday to surprise his daughters during a special homecoming.

Harmony and Trinity Golding were on the soccer field at Spotsylvania High School, getting ready for the junior varsity game against Chancellor High School. The sisters were co-captains for the coin toss and as they stood at midfield, they didn't know their father was standing behind them. He was dressed as

a knight, the school mascot.

The mascot tapped Trinity on the shoulder, handed her his sword and got a typical teenage look that suggested, "Why are you giving me this?" Then, as the father tried to remove the helmet—he was having a slight wardrobe malfunction—he

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pulled back enough to show his face and Harmony gasped.

“Dad?” she cried.

Trinity gasped as well, and the father threw his arms around both of them. As he kissed each on the forehead, the tears started—and they weren’t limited to the Golding sisters.

The three Chancellor players, who got an up-close and personal view of the reunion, were crying and saying, “Oh my God,” over and over. Those who knew about the soldier’s homecoming were recording video on their phones and wiping away a few tears, as well.

“I watch these on YouTube all the time and I always bawl my eyes out,” said Kirsten Brock, an athletic trainer at the school.

Michael Golding is with the Virginia Army National Guard’s 29th Infantry Division, based at Fort Belvoir. For the past 11 months, he’s been in Jordan, where he ran the dining hall facility.

He’s been deployed in combat zones three times, including in Iraq, and has been serving at Fort Pickett, southwest of Richmond, for 3½ years as part of long-term orders.

Golding had been texting his daughters regularly throughout the deployment and Trinity, especially, wanted to know when he’d be home. Thursday, April 7, is her 15th birthday, and she wanted to be sure her father was back by then.

The first thing he said, after the kissing and crying, was “I told you I’d be here for your birthday.”

His wife, Angela, is the stepmother of the soccer sisters, and she had contacted JV Coach Deon



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Michael Golding checks out the oversized gloves that are part of Spotsy High’s mascot costume.

Heggins to let him know the soldier would be at the game. Michael Golding had wondered if he might walk across the field, either before the game or at halftime, and surprise his daughters.

Heggins, who got the news less than 24 hours before the match, decided to make the most of it.

“He took over and ran with it,” Angela Golding said.

Heggins served 10 years in the Navy and his assistant coach, Gary Gresham, spent 6½ years on active duty and continues to work with the Marine Corps as a civilian. The veterans wanted to make the reunion special and Tim Acors, the school’s athletic director, told them to go for it.

They concocted the plan for Golding to dress as the school mascot. They told the referee, Kirk Hood, what was happening and he supplied a Marine Corps coin for the toss. He also did two combat tours.

Catie Wine, head coach for girls’ soccer, made other arrangements, stressing as she regularly does to the players that sports is more than a game. It’s a compilation of moments that build confidence and

“you’re going to remember special moments like these,” Wine tells her players.

The varsity squad knew what was happening, but junior varsity players didn’t—and that was no small feat, Heggins said. “To keep a secret is not easy with high school girls.”

He and the others wanted the moment to be golden for the Goldings.

“These kids, they also serve,” Heggins said about them and other military families. “They’re home, missing their dad for 11 months. I thought this would be a special way for them to have a reunion.”

It was more than the Army soldier expected, but Golding was glad to play along.

“They were shocked and they cried,” he said about his daughters.

“I cried, too, and I knew what was happening,” his wife said.

Before the moment on the field, Michael Golding said he hoped the plans would make his daughters smile—and maybe embarrass them a little as well.

“That’s what fathers are for,” he said.

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College grad shines light on disparities

BY CATHY DYSON
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

For her college thesis, Alex Boatwright researched an issue ripped from the headlines—that Black women in America are three to four times more likely to die during childbirth than their white counterparts.

“That’s a major problem and there’s not a whole lot of explanations for it,” she said. “What I found is that racism is a key driver of this crisis. There are so many examples of it, unfortunately, it has pervaded maternal health.”

The 21-year-old, who graduated from Colonial Forge High School in Stafford County in 2018, defended her thesis and earned an “A-” for the project, required as part of an honors program at the University of Lynchburg.

But even though she re-



Boatwright (left) demonstrates medication administration during her junior year.

cently turned the tassel on college, Boatwright’s not about to put her concerns behind her. She’ll start her career in July as a labor and delivery nurse at Mary Washington Hospital.

Ashley Simms, a registered nurse who supervised the 120 hours Boatwright spent in the department during her nursing rotations, looks forward to her joining the team.

“Her positive attitude, combined with her passion in this specialty area

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is refreshing,” Simms said. “She always arrived for our shifts with the biggest, brightest smile, so eager to learn and was ready to be part of any patient scenario and be as hands-on as we could be.”

Simms also helped Boatwright deal with the normal nerves. The recent graduate is bubbling with excitement at the thought of being at the bedside during such emotional moments. She’ll work the night shift, when there will be fewer visitors on the floor, giving her more chances to interact with moms and babies.

“I’m definitely a night owl,” she said. “I don’t have much problem staying up through the night, but I hate waking up early.”

‘TOTAL ROCKSTAR’

Alexandra Boatwright is the oldest of three daughters of William and Lisa Boatwright, who both work for Stafford County Public Schools. She’ll spend part of her summer as she’s done in the past, helping Jennifer Spindle, the school’s systems facility assessment supervisor, by moving desks, textbooks or other materials.

“Alex is amazing,” Spindle said. “She is a hard worker, a team player and will literally do anything asked of her. She is a total rock star.”

At one point, Boatwright considered a career in biology or biomedical science. Her mother suggested nursing, and Boatwright liked the idea. She observed different specialties as she pursued her degree, and things clicked during the obstetrics rotation.

“I saw my first live birth and I was like, I want to be doing this,” she said. “Honestly, I was super emotional, just as the mom was. It’s just a beautiful thing watching a baby being born.”

As her studies continued, Boatwright—a field hockey player and president of the Student Athletic Advisory Committee—needed a topic for a thesis as a student in the Westover Honors College at the Lynchburg university. When she came across a report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention about the high incidence of maternal deaths in the United States—and that rates were three to four times higher for Blacks than whites—her amazement at seeing a birth turned to shock at the disparity.

During research, she compared rates to those in other developed countries, such as Canada, Germany, France, Sweden and the United Kingdom—and found “the United States markedly surpasses them all as the leader,” she said. “That is insane. That absolutely blew me away.”

Even worse, American death rates have worsened. For each 100,000 live births, there were 17.4 women who died in 2018, then 20.1 fatalities the next year and 23.8 maternal deaths in 2020, the CDC reported.



Recent college graduate Alex Boatwright wrote a thesis about racial disparity in maternal deaths.

similar economic status, the average is 4.72 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births, according to a 2020 study by the Commonwealth Fund that Boatwright cited.

“That is the reality, pregnancy is still something that is dangerous in the United States and that is mind boggling,” she said.

‘IGNORED, UNDERVALUED’

The bar charts Boatwright examined showed the number of pregnancy deaths among Black women towered over every other category—far higher than rates for the total population, whites and Hispanics. There were 55.3 deaths among Black women per 100,000 births in 2020 compared to 18.2 for Hispanics and 19.1 for whites, according to the CDC.

As other health officials have noted in published reports, “social determinants” don’t seem to matter in the rate of Black deaths during pregnancy, birth or postpartum, she discovered. Regardless of their health, wealth, education or socioeconomic status, “they didn’t feel as though their words were being heard,” Boatwright said.

“There were repeated examples of women talking about how they didn’t feel listened to by their providers, they felt as though they were being dismissed, ignored, undervalued and that they just weren’t treated fairly,” she said.

She cited the experience of tennis star Serena Williams, who had a history of pulmonary embolisms—blood clots in the lungs. When she exhibited similar symptoms after giving birth in 2017, Williams told her nurse she needed a CT scan and a blood thinner to counter the problem.

In several published accounts, Williams said she was ignored, until she kept pressing the point and the test was finally ordered. It showed blood clots, just as Williams suspected.

“She’s a celebrity. You’d think with all the money and influence that she has

people would listen to her, but obviously it doesn’t matter,” Boatwright said in a story on the university website.

SHAPING THE CARE

Boatwright wondered if health care providers were required to take training on implicit bias—a form of bias that can occur automatically and unintentionally but nevertheless can impair judgement. She didn’t find many examples in research or in her own experience. Her professors drilled in the tenets of treating all patients with respect and dignity, but there was never any discussion of the way “some of our experiences may shape the care that we provide,” she said.

Boatwright wanted to put together a curriculum to address the issue, but her faculty advisers said that would be too great an undertaking. She narrowed her focus to an introductory seminar with four key elements.

Two establish a baseline understanding that everyone holds implicit biases and that Black women have consistently spoken out about their health needs, only to be ignored. A third briefly explains the long history of abuse against Black women, including being used for surgical experiments or subjected to procedures such as compulsory sterilization. The fourth encourages a shift away from “blaming someone’s race as a reason for why they have this certain health disparity,” Boatwright said.

Members of the thesis committee noted that Boatwright “identified a major disparity in maternal care and sought to make an original contribution to resolve it,” said Kristin Shargots, who also was Boatwright’s nursing adviser for four years.

“Alex is an asset to this nation’s nursing workforce,” Shargots said. “She will ensure all of her patients receive high-quality care and are listened to, regardless of the color of their skin.”

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Parents voice concern at Family Academy

BY CATHY DYSON
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While first-responders assured the Fredericksburg community they're doing everything they can to protect students from today's threats—ranging from the possibility of an active shooter to a fake report of a bomb in the school—another speaker encouraged the audience to embrace laughter as good medicine, both to live longer and to in-

crease brain power.

And as comments from parents illustrated, the first “Family Academy” presented by the Fredericksburg City Public Schools Saturday at James Monroe High School couldn't have been more timely. On four consecutive days in the past two weeks, James Monroe has been evacuated after someone called in a threat that turned out to be false.

The FBI calls the ac-

tion “swatting” because it involves a call to 911 that draws a massive response from law enforcement, usually a SWAT team. The hoax has been around at least since 2008, according to the FBI website, but it's been disturbingly popular this month.

On one day alone—Monday, Sept. 19—at least 11 school systems across Virginia reported lockdowns from shooters or bombs, including

Fredericksburg, Charlottesville and the counties of Culpeper and Fauquier, Arlington and Loudoun.

Raygan DeCarlo, a mother of six, asked those gathered Saturday for some answers.

“I'm hearing from the kids there's a bomb threat, that a bomb, that there was smoke. I don't know what's true because the school's not telling us anything,

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nothing,” she said during a question-and-answer portion of the safety forum. “We have no idea from the school or from the police why the school is being evacuated.”

Her voice cracked from both nervousness and concern as she continued: “You guys are telling us there’s police dogs going through our schools. The parents have a right to know why, don’t we?”

Her emotional pleas, which included a desire to help in any way she could, illustrated some of the ongoing issues schools are facing. Whether swatting is yet another fallout from COVID-19 isn’t clear, said Dr. Matt Eberhardt, deputy superintendent for Fredericksburg schools.

“I do know we’re seeing more emotional needs than we’ve ever seen before,” he told about 45 people gathered in the school auditorium.

One positive aspect of the pandemic was increased interest from the community in connecting with schools and that’s why Fredericksburg planned its first of several Family Academy events, said Superintendent Marci Catlett.

Saturday’s program included Marcia Tate, a renowned educational consultant, author and speaker who encouraged audience members to get up, introduce themselves and talk with someone—preferably a person they didn’t know—about the questions she posed to them.

And to have a good time while doing it. She held herself up as an example of the beneficial power of laughter, which research has shown boosts the immune system by increasing the production of antibodies that prevent infection.

“I not only teach this, I practice this,” she said, animatedly walking the aisles, telling the audience she’s 71 next week. She said that’s the only way she could have worked as an educator and consultant for 49 years because she didn’t start when she was 6.

However, that is when she decided to become a teacher. She lined up all her dolls and instructed them for hours.

“I didn’t have a single behavioral problem,” she said.

Tate also recognized that brains are wired differently these days than 40 years ago as a result of changing times, ranging from different family structures to more expo-



PHOTOS BY TRISTAN LOREI / THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Police Chief Bryan Layton (center) speaks about the Fredericksburg Police Department’s involvement at James Monroe High School during the forum.



TRISTAN LOREI / THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Marcia Tate, an educational consultant, author and speaker, talks to parents at James Monroe about preparing children for success in school and life.

sure to violence. She said children are coming to school angry because no one in their lives is talking, reading or singing to them at early ages and getting their brains ready for learning.

“If you don’t get anything else out of this seminar, please go home and rock, hold and love these babies,” Tate said.

More information about her message, which focuses on preparing children for success in school and life, is available at her website, drmarciatate.com.

Before Tate’s session, representatives from Fredericksburg Police, the Sheriff’s Office, Fire and Rescue and the schools presented detailed information about efforts to avoid “the pretty horrific events in Texas that have us all concerned,” Eberhardt said.

In May, a teenager entered an elementary school in Uvalde, killed 19 students and two teachers and wounded 17 others. Fredericksburg officials had active shooter plans in place before that event, the officials said, but met in earnest in recent months to update—and upgrade—

them.

As a result, every school employee has received crisis and emergency management training. All plans have been approved by law enforcement and emergency services, Eberhardt said.

“If we look at some of the things in Texas and other places, I want to assure everyone that law enforcement has open access to our buildings,” he continued. “We have made badges readily available for them, we have put keys in the hands of officers and vehicles so there should never be an issue that someone cannot get into one of our buildings.”

The school system has used state grants to create digital maps of schools that show emergency exits, alarms, cameras and fire extinguishers that are accessible by the 911 center. Should an emergency call be placed from a school, “it won’t just say the phone call came from Hugh Mercer, it will actually say it came from Hugh Mercer, Room 118,” Eberhardt said.

Fredericksburg plans to use another state grant to purchase radios that connect the school system

with the police department, he said.

Another lesson learned from Uvalde is the need for police to be able to access locked doors in schools and Police Chief Bryan Layton said his department is purchasing breaching kits—with items like axes, cutting tools and pry bars—for every school. Some department vehicles currently have the kits, but for safety, Layton wants them in every school.

Sheriff’s Capt. Scott Foster said he hoped those gathered would take one message from the meeting, that “we’re all here for the same mission,” to support schools and the community.

During questions from the audience, parents voiced concerns that were exactly opposite from issues raised more than two years ago when protesters across the nation suggested defunding the police or removing all resource officers from schools. Local parents wanted to know how many more school resource officers Fredericksburg could put in place and if items, such as metal detectors, could be used at school entrances.

DeCarlo and another mother, Melissa Battiste, said after the session that while they appreciate the concerted efforts of first-responders, they’re practically begging them to keep parents in the loop as much as possible. They described the alarm they felt recently when their kids called them—before the school system sent out any alerts—to say James Monroe had been evacuated and students were told to get out and leave their phones, purses or backpacks behind, if necessary.

“It is very scary,” DeCarlo said.

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