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The Illinois Connections for Families of the Fallen and The Chicago School Partnership: Inspiring Collaboration is its Chief Strength



Helen Keller once said, “Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much.” This statement was admirably borne out one sunlit August Sunday by students and staff from The Chicago School when they worked together with other organizations to make successful an event to connect families of fallen service members with resources, services and equally important for many attendees, *each other*. The event, Connections at the Zoo: Bringing Families of the Fallen Together was held at Brookfield Zoo and was the second one of the year organized by [Illinois Connections for Families of the Fallen](#) (ICFF).

Running parallel to the controlled chaos that can usually be found at any well-organized event is the sense of family as people who might only see each other twice a year at ICFF events greet each other with hugs, kisses and laughter. The bonds forged by families are strengthened at every gathering and easily stretched to encompass each new family that comes along.

“ICFF has created a space for families to come together to share their loss and celebrate the life of

their loved one. I’ve personally witnessed families connecting with one another and no longer feeling alone in their grief,” explains [Jill Glenn](#), LCSW, director, [Community Partnerships](#), The Chicago School. “Every year one event is held downstate and another in the Chicago area.”

The Chicago School’s relationship with ICFF began six years ago. ICFF itself is a project of [Health and Disability Advocates](#) (HDA), an organization that works on behalf of vulnerable populations, promoting health and economic security so that they may lead secure, dignified lives. One group HDA advocates for is service members and veterans. ICFF grew out of its program for veterans and The Chicago School has been involved with ICFF since its inception.

According to HDA’s director of veterans’ programs, Laura Gallagher Watkin, “The Chicago School students have come to and helped at all our events. For lack of a better word, the events are like conferences with tracks running simultaneously. Families can choose what is appropriate or interesting to them. They know what {to choose} based on where they are in their grief. Students from The Chicago School always run at least one session.”



(L-R) at ICFF event: Linda Grieco, TCSP student Melissa Marsh, Angeli Grieco, Joshua Grieco, TCSP student Brittney Briggs, and Ralph Grieco.

In a coordinated effort, HDA, The Chicago School and other organizations have always staffed the events with volunteers whose desire to help and whose areas of expertise make them perfect for just such an occasion. The collaborative nature of the event has turned some who started out as guests into some of ICFF's biggest boosters, oftentimes volunteering themselves. In the case of the Grieco family, Linda and Ralph Grieco first attended an ICFF event after learning about it through [Operation Support Our Troops America](#), another organization that has had connections to ICFF.

A family with military roots that include four generations and stretch all the way

back to War World I, the Griecos came to their first ICFF event to help their grandchildren and themselves after the death of their son Staff Sergeant Kevin Douglas Grieco. "Having grown up in the military, Kevin was very patriotic. He was both in the Navy and then the Army."

In a joint interview, both husband and wife are quite eager to talk about their son, their grandchildren and ICFF. A genial Ralph explains, "We have been to all of the events, except for one, since the beginning of ICFF. We've taken the kids to all of them."

Linda, in a tone as friendly as her husband's, concurs, "We take them to be with other people, other children that have suffered a loss. It's comforting to them. There is comfort in being able to feel safe to express yourself." Ralph further explains, "It's been a good outlet for the kids to grow into their grief and know that it doesn't always have to be sad. The counseling seminars are

helpful and you choose to go to ones with topics that you feel are going to be most helpful. You make connections."

The Griecos are among many who view the ICFF gatherings as something akin to a family reunion where the members come together to be helped and oftentimes, for those who have attended more than one, to use their experience to help where they can. Inspired by the collaborative nature, the Griecos say that they have sometimes found themselves serving as what they refer to as peer facilitators to newcomers. Such seamless transitions appear to happen often and are likely one of the many reasons why ICFF is so well regarded and draws so many volunteers.

[Clinical Psychology](#) student Brittney Briggs, M.A., was one such volunteer and is an example of how the cooperative culture inspires people to do more. She first began with ICFF in 2012, starting out as a volunteer. For her last two events with ICFF, however, she worked as a contractor in the position of consultant.

"We've had two Chicago School students that have volunteered with us and done wonderful jobs," HDA's Laura Gallagher Watkin explains. "We had some contract work available and were able to hire them. We first did it with Tim Burnett who was a reservist and doing his thesis on military families and suicide. After Tim, we hired Brittney. We saw the value of bringing them on board to work on planning ICFF events. They were both wonderful -- they were really made for the position."

In her role as a consultant, Briggs, whose career goal is to serve military service members, veterans and their families, was one of the people responsible for planning the last two events held by ICFF, just as Burnett had done the year before. She has also co-facilitated seven sessions, including ones covering such topics as family dynamics after loss, myths about grief and ways to honor a loved one.

“Switching to my work as a consultant with HDA, I was able to contribute to the events in a different way. I was able to learn and be a part of the ‘behind the scenes’ event planning and coordination that goes into putting on {the} events.”

As is the custom, other students from The Chicago School also volunteered their time to give presentations at the event in August, including fourth-year Clinical Psychology student Melissa Marsh and third-year clinical psychology student Marie St. Clair. Both women have volunteered for ICFF for several events and have led sessions before. Marsh, who is an officer on the board of the Military Psychology Student Association in Chicago, says she first volunteered to gain more experience with the military community, but her reason very quickly evolved.

“After experiencing my first ICFF event at the Brookfield Zoo in fall 2013, my interest in the organization became deeper because I wanted to help those who have helped us, as clichéd as that might sound. Since that first event, I have participated in three others and plan to be involved for as long as I possibly can.”

St. Clair co-led a session on sibling grief with another TCSPS student, Liz Gunnell in August. “I initially started volunteering with ICFF because I enjoy working with soldiers. I’m a soldier so I understand military culture. I continue to volunteer because I enjoy interacting with military families. I’m enjoying taking on a greater role and becoming more involved with ICFF.”

Whatever their role, students seem to be grateful for the experience of working with ICFF. “I’m a first year student in the [Ed.S School Psychology Program](#),” says Azucena Bahena, a student volunteer who took on the role of translator for Spanish speaking families. “Volunteering with ICFF opened up an opportunity to provide a safe space for families that are still grieving.”

“From the beginning she {Jill Glenn} was very passionate about this being a good opportunity for students and we’ve really found this to be the case,” Gallagher Watkin says matter-of-factly. “I think that our relationship with The Chicago School is really integral to the success of the programming that we’ve been doing. We get approached by other schools and we’ve never felt the need to look anywhere else.”

The partnership is clearly a symbiotic one as expressed by Glenn, “ICFF has allowed students to engage with grieving families and learn about the veteran community. I think our students are often humbled by the experience and have a greater appreciation for those who serve and for the families and the ultimate sacrifice that was made.”