



## Apollo takes war, losses personally

Residents of close-knit,  
everyone-knows-everyone town  
support the troops

By Rossilynne Skena

*This article was originally published Oct. 15, 2008, in The Lion's Roar*

APOLLO — When Kelly Doerzbacher was serving as a U. S. Air Force anesthesiologist in Afghanistan, those deployed with her must have thought she was a celebrity.

There was always a bulging stack of mail waiting for Major Doerzbacher, 32. Sometimes it was a package of cookies, brownies, books or Pittsburgh Steelers memorabilia. Other times it was a batch of long letters and newspaper clippings updating her on what was happening in her hometown of Apollo.

Nestled in southwestern Pennsylvania, Apollo is an everybody-knows-everybody community. And it supports its men and women serving overseas.



Flags line the main street in Apollo as part of an ongoing tribute to the town's servicemen and women. (Photos by John Beale)

“A lot of people there were like, boy, I wish I was from your hometown,” Doerzbacher said in a telephone interview from California, where she is assigned to Travis Air Force Base’s David Grant USAF Medical Center, near Fairfield.

But the town also has an undesired distinction.

Within the past five years, wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have claimed the lives of three men, all graduates of the same high school, leaving family, friends and their shared hometown struggling with grief—and with the numbing unfairness of the numbers.

Apollo-Ridge High School draws from five communities, totaling about 10,000 people. Within that population base, the three war deaths are at a rate nearly 20 times that of the nation as a whole.

The town has unified to support three area families whose sons did not make it back alive to reminisce about letters and packages.

As of early October, 4,788 soldiers have died in Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom, according to the Department of Defense. These deaths have a nationwide impact.

“There are going to be some locations that are more affected than others,” Department of Defense spokesman and Army Lt. Col. Les’ Melnyk said.

But Apollo has been slammed.

Stevon Booker. Joshua Justice Henry. Michael Girdano.

The names of those fallen soldiers are etched onto the community’s hearts. “If anything, it has brought an awareness that this too can happen close to home,” said William Kerr, superintendent of Armstrong School District, who has served as Apollo’s mayor and a county commissioner. “Sometimes when you hear on the news that someone has given their life, you think it can’t happen here.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Apollo’s downtown is just off State Route 56, with the two landmarks of many western Pennsylvania towns: a set of railroad tracks and a river. Railroad tracks run parallel to the Kiskiminetas River, and the two form the town’s western boundary.

The town’s household income is well below the national average. Its demographic is largely white.

According to the 2000 U.S. Census, the town’s median household income is \$22,989, compared with the nation’s \$41,994.

More than 96 percent of its residents are white, compared with 75 percent nationally. There are 1,895 people residing in Apollo’s three-tenths of a square mile, according to the borough’s Web site.

Apollo was originally named for the Greek god of the sun. As the Apollo 11 voyage unfolded, the community got wrapped up in the space race and having its name be a part of international fervor. The day after man landed on the moon on July 20, 1969, Apollo held a moon landing celebration and has every year since. It’s a festival that features funnel cakes, fireworks and enough carnival rides to make your head spin. Next year, the festival will celebrate its 40-year anniversary.

Apollo is home to Romo's Mojo Tire and Lube, Small World Day Care, Mosey Inn and Grandma's Attic Antiques and Collectibles.

Farms line the roads. Silos are this town's skyscrapers.

Flags flapping in the breeze and clanging wind chimes deflect attention from the small homes' thirst for fresh paint.

There are six churches—and that's just along the main roads.

"It's a community of churches and families that bond together," Kerr said, "whether it's the church community or sports and athletics."

Or patriotism.

Cross the railroad tracks, wait at the red light, and continue northeast up a steep hill. Owens Field—where more than 350 football games have been played through the years—is on the left. On the right, there's a home with its block foundation painted: "We support troops." The high school is just ahead on the right.



**Memorials to Apollo's three servicemen killed in the line of duty hang in the lobby of the Apollo post office.**

There's a contrast between home front attitudes today than during the Vietnam War, said Scott Bennett, a professor of political science at Penn State University, who studies international conflict and the causes and consequences of war.

"The people who support the cause are really much more supportive or committed than people were certainly by the end of Vietnam ... There's a cause people believe in here," said Bennett, co-author of "The Behavioral Origins of War."

Melnyk, of the Department of Defense, said communities often bond when faced with tragedy.

"All of these losses hurt," Melnyk said, "and small towns tend to pull together when they're hit by them."

This small town certainly has.

Apollo-Ridge School District encompasses a 75-square-mile area including Kiski Township, Apollo Borough, North Apollo Borough, Blacklick Township and Young Township, District Superintendent Cheryl Griffith said.

Although the school serves a number of towns, most call Apollo home. Henry and Girdano both played football at Apollo-Ridge. Doerzbacher, of Allegheny Township, attended Greensburg Central Catholic High School, about 30 miles south of Apollo-Ridge High School.

About 100 students graduate each year from Apollo-Ridge High School, guidance counselor Michelle Lukehart said. Few serve in the military.

Because of the area's small size and population, Griffith said, "It does seem a little extraordinary to have had such loss."

Kerr said the Apollo-Ridge area and Armstrong County have had a high rate of deaths since the war began.

"Those young men gave of their lives so we might be free," Kerr said. "We are a grateful nation, but we are also a community which is very proud of our young men and women who continue to serve in the military."

Each year the school asks seniors to mark their post-graduation plans. In 2006, three students said they planned to enlist in the armed forces, one in 2007 and two in 2008, Lukehart said.

Apollo-Ridge School District is a single campus, home to the Apollo-Ridge Vikings, where high schoolers, middle schoolers and elementary students are bused each day. Chevys, Fords, and Buicks—some with U.S. Marine Corps bumper stickers—fill the parking spaces in front of the building.

Walk inside the high school's entrance and you see Henry's and Girdano's blue football jerseys hanging in wooden frames.



**Football jerseys worn by Michael Girdano and Joshua Henry are displayed in the lobby of the Apollo-Ridge High School.**

Their names are embroidered above gold numbers— Henry 65, Girdano 22—numbers that will now stay unused, pressed behind panes of glass as a silent reminder. Students in the school’s technology education program made the frames.

Scores of students walk past the jerseys each day, and Griffith is sure they aren’t numb to their significance.

“I’m sure that there’s a heightened level of sensitivity and appreciation toward the contribution that those young men have made locally and beyond,” she said.

The town is sensitive.

Hand-made tributes to each of the fallen soldiers hang in the post office.

Jan Cramer, a distribution window clerk at the post office, who was born and raised in Apollo, saw floods of cards and letters come through the post office after each man’s death.

“Each one of the boys was just wonderful,” Cramer said. “Doing this for our country and it’s just a great loss. It really is. Each one was going to go far in life, and each life was cut short.”

Everyone, it seems, remembers news of the first death.

\*\*\*\*\*

Freddie Jackson remembers the town’s reaction when news of her son’s death spread: “support beyond support.”

Staff Sgt. Stevon Booker, 34, of Kiski Township, was the first to die—on April 5, 2003. His mother found out the following day when two soldiers came to tell her. Neighbors rushed to be with her. Others called to talk. Many brought food.

“Some of it spoiled,” Jackson said. “We couldn’t eat it fast enough.”

She speaks with pride about her neighbors, who quickly became her support network. “I just feel that I couldn’t live in a better place than Apollo,” she said. “The community just really got together. I have to brag.”

Her son left for the Army after high school graduation. He was serving his 15th year when killed by enemy fire near Baghdad.

Booker loved children, Jackson said, and she wishes he could have someday had his own. Over the years, Cramer often saw Jackson at the post office coming to mail packages overseas.

Jackson remembers her son telling her the United States has a good, well-equipped Army.

“He said, ‘OK, we’re going to do it.’ Not doubtful. Always positive,” she said. To this day, when Jackson goes into a grocery store or walks down the street in Apollo, people hug her and thank her for her son’s sacrifice.

“It’s sad,” she said. “But it’s nice that they haven’t forgotten and that they’re so caring and thoughtful.”

Jackson has been supportive of the other two families that have lost young men in the war, going to all the viewings and funerals.

When Joshua Justice Henry died, Jackson was told that his mother, Perri Henry, wanted to talk to her.

“I went straight to her house ... We bonded,” Jackson said. “We have a bond that will never be broken. If you haven’t lost a child, you don’t know. It’s like a piece of your heart has been broken.”

When Michael Girdano died, Jackson—along with a group of mothers who have lost their sons in the war—went to see Cindy Girdano.

“We just went. We wanted her to talk to us, to know how she feels,” Jackson said. Cramer marvels at the mothers’ strength.

“I think they know that their sons believed in what they were doing,” Cramer said. “That’s why I guess they can deal with it.”

The group of mothers—Jackson, Perri Henry, and two women from nearby towns other than Apollo who have also lost their sons to the war—is like a team, Jackson said. “I told her we weren’t going to forget her,” Jackson said about her visit with Cindy Girdano. “You know how everybody has a funeral and then everybody’s gone? We don’t want it to be like that.”



**Staff Sgt. Stevon Booker was 34 when he was killed near Baghdad.**

\*\*\*\*\*

A little more than a year after Booker’s death, the community was shaken by another: Spc. Joshua Justice Henry.

The Apollo resident, 21, was killed in action in Iraq on Sept. 20, 2004.

Henry joined the Army a few months after graduating from high school, after a recruiter had visited the school, his younger sister, Jasmine Henry, said.

Jasmine Henry heard the news of her brother's death when she was at ICM School of Business & Medical Careers in Pittsburgh, where she studied business management and travel and tourism. That night, she came home to be with her family.

On her way home, her cell phone was inundated with text messages and phone calls. When she arrived home, she felt overwhelmed by the number of people already there—a continuous flow who filtered in and out of the house dropping off food, cards and flowers.

At a memorial service for the soldier, Kerr, the former Apollo mayor and a friend of the family, spoke about the death.

“Today, we honor and pay tribute to an American hero—one of our own who loved life and loved his family, this community and his country,” Kerr said in a speech at the service. “We have lost a hometown treasure with strong character ... a brave soldier defending freedom ... a young man with a bright and promising future.”

To Jasmine Henry, her big brother was always “Joshua.” His football and military friends called him “Hendog,” a play off of his last name.

Joshua Henry liked working out, skiing and playing football, Jasmine Henry said, adding that he was “outgoing and hilarious.”

“If I had a bad day at school, he'd instantly cheer me up,” she said.

Joshua Henry wanted to go to college and play football after finishing in the military. His goal was to be a teacher.

Four years after this death, the community's support hasn't faded. People still send cards to let the Henry family know they're thinking of them.

Jasmine Henry's mother, Perri Henry, has been in touch with Stevon Booker's mother, Freddie Jackson. Jasmine Henry said she talks to Jackson's daughter from time to time. Sometimes, she visits with the Girdanos.

“It's not like we can imagine the same exact thing they're going through,” she said, “but we have a clue.”

Joshua Henry understood and appreciated his community of caring people with traditional values, Kerr said at the service.

“It’s a place we call home, and ‘home is where the heart is’—where families, neighbors and friends live life to the fullest and have an abiding love for God, community and country,” Kerr said. “Josh knew this better than anyone, e-mailing family and friends about how much he missed ‘the place we call home.’ ”

\*\*\*\*\*

Second Lt. Michael Girdano started dreaming in red, white and blue in the seventh grade. “When Michael decided he was going to do something, he did it,” Cindy Girdano said of her son.

After visiting West Point with a friend’s family, Girdano, of Kiski Township, set his sights on one day being enrolled at the academy. Kerr wrote a letter of recommendation for the student.

“He was an outstanding student academically. ... [He also] participated in athletics,” Kerr said. “He was a genuine person who I believe had all the attributes of being a cadet and being successful at West Point.”

The terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, did not deter her son from wanting to go into the Army. Instead, Cindy Girdano said, it made him more determined.

Cindy Girdano calls her son “an all-around American boy.” He loved the Steelers, and he loved to fish and to hunt.

In high school, Girdano played football and baseball—and made all A’s. All the while, he never bragged and never let his mother make a fuss.

“The day he graduated from West Point, it was like another day to him,” Cindy Girdano said.

Everything, she said, looked easy to him.

After school, training and being stationed in Texas, Girdano was deployed to Afghanistan.

A month later, on Aug. 1, 2008, the 23-year-old officer was killed.

Girdano’s job in Afghanistan was to look for roadside bombs. A well-disguised improvised explosive device killed him, three other soldiers and an Afghani interpreter who were riding in a humvee in Chowkay Valley.

Cindy Girdano felt honored to see her son’s football jersey hanging in the halls of his alma mater.

A group of local mothers who have lost their sons to the war spent time with Cindy Girdano after the news of her son's death.

"When they found out about Michael, they all came to me and spent an afternoon with me," Cindy Girdano said. "That's what kind of town this is."

\*\*\*\*\*

Despite the tragic human toll and the horribly skewed number of deaths, Apollo is the kind of town that will be there with a card, a hug, a casserole or a smile when disaster strikes.

It's the kind of town that won't forget the quietly grieving families of Stevon Booker, Joshua Justice Henry and Michael Girdano.

It's the kind of town that, despite the exorbitant patriotic price it has paid, will remember to take the front-porch flags down when rain is expected, and the kind of place that will be sure to send Kelly Doerzbacher letters and packages when she's deployed overseas again.

Now at Travis Air Force Base's David Grant USAF Medical Center, Doerzbacher expects to be deployed again in May or next November.

Doerzbacher lived in Apollo since she was 2 years old. Her parents have sold their Apollo house and now live in California.

After years of schooling and training, she entered active duty in April 2007 and was deployed to Afghanistan in January 2008.

Doerzbacher, an anesthesiologist, cared for people including coalition forces, Afghani army, police, women and children.



**Freddie Jackson, shown here at Owens Grove in Apollo, says she received "support beyond support" from her neighbors after the death of her son, Staff Sgt. Stevon Booker.**

She may not always recognize the name on the return address of all the letters and packages she'll surely receive while overseas, and those who pen her name on each envelope may have never met her. But many knew her as a friend of a friend, someone who drove on the same roads, who sat at the same red lights, someone woven with the same Apollo, southwestern Pennsylvania thread.

She knew she could always count on the encouragement of her family and friends when deployed, but she said the overwhelming support from the community was more than she could imagine.

“Not only I benefited from that support,” Doerzbacher said, “but people I was deployed with from all over the United States, I think, felt the appreciation and support that came from Apollo.”