



According to the Department of Defense, about 55% of active-duty soldiers are parents. From the fall of 2005 through the fall of 2006, one of those soldiers was Amanda Kraft.

Amanda Kraft is 28 years old and lives in Bradenton. You may have seen her at the Target on 14th Street West, where she works three days a week as a cashier. You may have seen her on the campus of Manatee Technical Institute, where she studies at the Law Enforcement Academy. You may have seen her taking care of her daughters, Mackinzie, 8, and Taylor, who just turned 6.

But here is what you would not know just from encountering Amanda at Target, at school, or around town with her girls: That she had wanted to serve her country since she was a tenth-grader. That she received her orders to deploy to Iraq when Taylor was one month old. That she deferred the deployment in part so she could continue nursing her daughter. That she was stationed at Tallil Air Base, near the Kuwaiti border. That she drove convoys and endured small-arms fire. That she was promoted twice. That she attended a memorial service for a young man in a sister unit, a young man whose jobs and duties were exactly like hers. That she would Skype twice a day with her daughters, and read to them across the ocean.

"I'm very proud, very honored to have gone to Iraq," Amanda says. "When I hear a song that has significance for veterans, I feel so proud. Veterans Day, Memorial Day—they mean more to me than they ever did. But in some ways I feel so insignificant. I'm proud that I served. But I mean, who knows that?"

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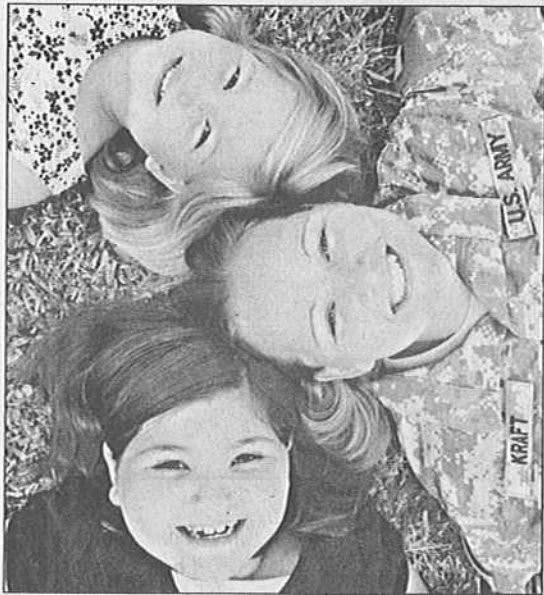
"It's not something that's done for the recognition," Amanda clarifies. "It's more that we want people to realize the sacrifices that people make. The community needs to realize that there are people, people you see every day, and you don't even know what they have done for freedom, for America, for you to do whatever you are doing that day. I think there should be more interaction between the community and vets, to impress this on the community."

We think Amanda is right. So here is her story.



"When I was in high school, I had heard about the ROTC program, the junior ROTC program. It wasn't until tenth grade that I had the motivation to do it, to get involved in that type of lifestyle. It is a lifestyle, it's discipline, it's teamwork. You do everything together—it's not just about you. Being in ROTC is like a sorority almost. Every soldier feels like that to this day. You connect with people almost instantaneously—you have that connection with people, that strong bond, that friendship with soldiers.





convoy, and they hit an IED. They lost a person from their company, and I went to the memorial service that they had at Tallil. It was such an emotional time for everybody in that place. The man that was attacked, I had just seen him a couple of times on missions; but I was a sobbing idiot, just to know if nothing else that our friends still there are feeling that pain. It's not something that anybody wants to encounter. But now, I remember that. The sacrifices are unreal. And for families, for his family—it's just inconceivable."



Amanda returned from her service in November 2006, two weeks after Taylor's second birthday. Since her deployment ended, she has divorced, moved with her daughters to Bradenton, and—with the support of the Operation Military Assistance Program at Jewish Family & Children's Service—enrolled in the Law Enforcement Academy at Manatee Technical Institute.

"[The divorce] would have happened anyway; my time in Iraq just gave me the time away to evaluate the situation effectively, to think what was best for the girls, and myself, and even my husband.

"As far as my girls go, I think that my girls are proud of me. I believe that. I think my oldest ended up with some separation anxiety, as far as being too far away from me or away for too long, even with family. She's usually okay for the first two days; but if she's at my aunt's for a vacation for five days, she's calling me at night crying, missing me. But we're close. And I've gone and I've talked to their classrooms in the past, answered whatever question the kids have.

"Right now I am in the Law Enforcement Academy at Manatee Technical Institute. It

lasts five months; then you apply to departments—the sheriff's department, the police department—at the end of Academy. I hear about the budgets and how few jobs there are. I'm hoping for Manatee Sheriff's Office; I'm going to apply there, but I'm also going to apply at other places because there are only so many spots. I also work three days a week as a cashier at Target. I did security there before going to the Academy.

"[Jewish Family and Children's Service] assisted me with rent so that I could pay for what I had to do to get into the Academy; there are polygraphs, fingerprinting, and other [admission requirements] which are all out-of-pocket costs. They paid my rent for a couple of months. It's been

like a godsend; seriously, I wouldn't be where I am today and going to the Academy if not for them and that [Operation Military Assistance] program. That program, not only has it benefitted me, but it sent my girls to summer camp. So they had something to do over the summer.

"And it helped me purchase my uniform for the Law Enforcement Academy. I got the letter that I was accepted, but the letter said you need to come up with \$530.00 by this day; and I couldn't. And what was I going to do? Walk away from it? And if it hadn't been for the [Operation Military Assistance Program], that's what it would have been. I'm very thankful to them, and for everyone who donated to them.

"I've sat down with my daughters and told them: 'I may need to go back to the Army, so I can keep taking care of you, and keep having strong employment,' but they start crying instantly. They look at me, and I remember my youngest, she was [saying]: 'But we love you!' And I could hear it in her voice, 'Aren't we enough for you?' And I told them, 'I won't go, I won't consider it. You are enough for me.'"

Special thanks to Devon Jarrett, Operation Military Assistance Program Coordinator at Jewish Family & Children's Service, www.jfcs-cares.org.



Rabbi Elaine Rose Glickman is an author, teacher, wife and mother. She serves on the board of All Faiths Food Bank and volunteers at her synagogue, Temple Emanu-El, and her children's schools, Temple Emanu-El Preschool and Goldie Feldman Academy. Her newest book is *Sacred Parenting*.