

## **The Forgotten Suffering of Service Children**

### **By Michael Percy**

Joy O'Neill has travelled the world with her husband Squadron Leader Kevin O'Neill. When they landed at RAF Halton near Aylesbury in North Buckinghamshire in 2007 Joy took on the job of governor at Halton Community Combined School. She wanted to give something back to her community and use her background as a teacher to support the school. Her own three children were all at university.

Five years later she has won an award in a national programme to find the most Inspirational Women Of 2012 and has had tea with Samantha Cameron at Ten Downing Street.

How did it all happen? Joy is not quite sure, all she knows is that when she became involved with the school she noticed that the children from service families were presenting the teachers with concerns they could not resolve. At Halton School three-quarters of the children are from service families living at nearby RAF Halton.

Joy explained: "The teachers were saying they sometimes have children from service families who are very quiet, very withdrawn – they couldn't coax them out of their shells. Some children were very anxious or would burst into tears and some would lash out physically; nothing serious but worrying all the same.

"At that time – 2007 – there was no awareness of the special set of problems associated with the children of military families. Teachers realised there was something going on but they didn't know how to raise it with the parents. All they knew was that a group of children were playing up and a common factor was that mum or dad was in the RAF. Teachers didn't understand what was going on."

Service children have all the normal problems associated with school but there is another layer that is unknown in civilian life. "Children worry about what they see in the media," explained Joy. "If the younger children see something on

TV about Afghanistan for example, they don't realise that their own parent is elsewhere. They see a report in the news and they think that could be my mum, or my dad.

“Some children are very resilient and take everything in their stride – other children find it really difficult when mum or dad is away. I have a friend and her teenage boy becomes physically ill every time his dad goes away. He can't sleep, he can't eat, he doesn't concentrate at school. The majority of children cope quite well but there are always little things that worry or upset them.”

Worries about the safety of a parent or in some cases a brother or sister serving in a war zone is complicated by the fact that service children face a new school every few years as their parents are frequently posted to new jobs.

A military child could face moving house; finding new friends; settling into a new school and adjusting to a new curriculum all at the same time. This is often in addition to the trauma of separation from a close family member – one who could be going to a dangerous posting in a war zone.

Joy had lived with this as her own children grew up but, like all military wives, she regarded it as part of service life – and service people do not complain. But now Joy could view the problem with a degree of detachment that allowed her to apply her professional training.

“I began talking to people, doing interviews, doing formal research and I began to unpick all of this and identify the specific worries. I went to the head teacher at the time and said we really need to do something to arrest this.

“Some of the parents had been asking for a link between the school and the military; one central person who can deal with any problems- a two-way channel of communication. We looked around at what was going on in other parts of the country and overseas. There was nothing going on apart from RAF Akrotiri in Cyprus - they had a mobility co-ordinator who kept all the childrens' school records and made certain they followed them on each move.”

Joy wrote a detailed brief based on her research and identifying the special challenges that service children face: “I proposed that service children should be considered as a specific group – in the same way that the children of

travelling people or refugee children get recognition of their special needs. A child with English as a second language; a child with special educational needs or a child living in local authority care all benefit from specific programmes of support. People understand that these children have additional needs. And staff in schools would be expected to be aware of these needs and give extra support if required.”

That was the start of a long road for Joy that led to the establishment of her charity Service Children Support Network. The network brings together education and welfare professionals who provide support and training for teachers and schools to help service children face the challenges that can arise as a result of service life.

Joy has been a military wife for twenty years and married to Kevin for twenty-three years: “Our eldest was 15 months old and I was pregnant with our second child when Kevin went to RAF Cranwell to do his training. He had always wanted to join the RAF since he was a cadet at school. Now he is Provost in security. A lot of the work he does is confidential – security and intelligence - so we don’t talk about it.

“I love being a military wife. We have had the chance to live all across the UK and overseas – places that I would never have normally gone to. I’ve met people from all walks of life and experienced many cultures. I’ve made fabulous friends and I think my children have benefited because they’ve had lots of positive experiences. Although, on the down side, Kevin and I have been separated six years out of twenty years in the service and it would be wrong of me to say there have not been challenges and problems. But those are all part of everybody’s life.”

Now Joy can add Samantha Cameron to the list of people she knows and Number Ten Downing Street as one of the places she has visited. Meeting the Prime Minister’s wife was part of being selected as one of five Inspirational Women of the Year in 2012 for her work in building the charity Service Children Support Network. The charity has grown from a few volunteers giving advice to

local schools in Bucks to a Social Enterprise that has trained volunteers working across the United Kingdom.

“Five years on we work with about 3500 schools across the UK with links to Germany, Cyprus, Canada and America. When we can get proper funding we will apply for full charity status. Last year we got a small amount of funding from the National Lottery which enabled us to do local training events and have our first national conference in Nov 2011. We were able to subsidise the cost of the conference so schools with small budgets could send representatives.”

It was Joy’s eldest son who nominated her for the Inspirational Women of the year programme run by The Daily Mail. The award was presented by journalist Nicolas Owen. The press coverage of Joy’s selection as an Inspiration Woman has boosted the profile of the SCSN.

“How did they manage to pick me,” she asked, “because the other four ladies selected with me had phenomenal stories and there must be many other very worthy people out there. I can’t say I didn’t enjoy the experience but the main thing is that it will get the SCSN noticed. It has done already. I get calls and emails all the time.”

Joy’s next project with SCSN is setting up a fully accredited Open University course. “The course will be about service children and service families, the difficulties they face and how they can best be helped. It will explore the issues based on research and case studies and reveal what resources are available to teachers and welfare professionals to help them help the children when things are going wrong for them.

“The course is all agreed but we need to find a benefactor to donate the £100,000 which the OU needs to complete the research, produce the teaching aids and properly resource the programme. It would be part of the continuing professional development of teachers and welfare professionals. This would make such a dramatic difference to the lives of our children. And all this is being done for our children.”

(ENDS)

### **SCSN Children's Art Competition panel**

In 2011 the Service Children Support Network held an art competition with the theme Through The Eye Of A Service Child. Many of the entries reflect the extra stress service children face – and often take for granted. Joy O'Neill uses several of the artworks in her training sessions with teachers. In 2012 SCSN are running a photographic competition for service children.

### **Resource Side bar**

**Service Children Support Network** can be contacted at

[www.servicechildrensupportnetwork.com](http://www.servicechildrensupportnetwork.com)

**Joy O'Neill's experiences** as a service mother and in training professionals in the special needs of service children has come together in her first book: ***Service Children- A Guide For Education And Welfare Professionals.***

**The Inspirational Women of The Year Awards** is run by The Daily Mail In association with BHS and in support of the Wellbeing of Women organisation [www.wellbeingofwomen.org.uk](http://www.wellbeingofwomen.org.uk).