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Military service inspired by 9/11 puts couple on unlikely path

BY LAURA BERMAN

Jocelyn Benson — expert on election law, former Democratic candidate for Secretary of State, marathoner, law professor, author — has always been driven by goals and the belief that she can meet them.

She is also a military wife who waits for the phone to ring every day, for a call that may last only seconds.

Since July 22, when her husband, Army Spc. Ryan Friedrichs, was deployed to Afghanistan, uncertainty has taken root in Benson's life.

Friedrichs, 35, enlisted in January 2011, 10 years after being inspired to one day serve his country in the aftermath of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

Determined to follow through on that promise to himself, he decided to seek active duty in the infantry, although his Harvard graduate degree and other skills qualified him for placements that would have kept him far from Afghanistan.

"We believe that you have to be the change you want to see," says Benson, in her book-filled Detroit condo overlooking the Detroit River. A large poster depicting the Indian leader Mahatma Gandhi looms in the study.

At 34, Benson already has an array of accomplishments behind her, but none of them foreshadowed this private role, one that's scary and challenging in ways she — and other military spouses — could never fully anticipate. To find support, and raise the profile of others in this largely invisible position, she co-founded a new organization, Military Spouses of Michigan (milspousemichigan.org).

Friedrichs, who met Benson at Harvard in 2003, was an unlikely future soldier when they met. He was a graduate student at the Kennedy School for Government, a political progressive, a runner and a native of Ann Arbor — a city that's never been a haven for military recruiters. She was in law school. After the couple's 2006 wedding, he headed Michigan Voice, a nonprofit that encourages civic engagement and voter participation.

Patriotism is not a partisan matter, though, and since the terrorist attacks, "Ryan has felt a call to serve his country. He just wasn't sure how he would do that," Benson says.

Her eyes have been opened to the work that men and women in the military do — acts of bravery, of heroism that she now understands firsthand, up close.

What she sees from this new perspective is extraordinary sacrifice: As a wife, she watches her husband excel in a far-away world where physical and emotional courage are required, without applause or

recognition.

"We talk about bravery and heroism on the part of the military almost as a platitude ... it really is heroic on a day to day basis. And inspiring," she says.

Even as she admires her husband's decision to enlist, she suffers for it. A comedy portraying a soldier communicating by Skype with his wife elicits tears, a poignant reminder that a computer application is the closest way she can see and touch the man dearest to her.

On Aug. 28, Friedrichs lost a friend — Army Pfc. Shane Cantu of Corunna, Mich. — in Afghanistan. Cantu was only 20, but he and Friedrichs had entered basic training together, went to airborne school together, and flew to their first base in Italy. They deployed to Afghanistan together and were in the same unit.

Flags flew at half-staff Monday in Cantu's honor, the day of his funeral. "It's been very tough," Benson says.

Benson says she has learned that the 1 percent of us who serve in the military assume an almost invisible status, one shared by their spouses and families. Their sacrifice is monumental — but with a war so far away, it is also out of everyday consciousness. They are far away; their families are scattered, their aloneness largely unrecognized by most of us.

"The smallest expression of gratitude (to soldiers and veterans) means so much," she says.

Having never encountered a problem she wouldn't try to fix, Benson describes Military Spouses of Michigan as an attempt to help herself and other military spouses find support, combat isolation and to help each other. One project undertaken by members, for example, is celebrating the birthdays and anniversaries that would otherwise go unmarked. Despite their different backgrounds, the spouses — all women, so far — have found common ground.

"They're some of the very best, strongest women I have ever met. Connecting with them makes you feel that you're not alone," Benson said.

Frustrated by the difficulty of getting her husband a ballot in time for the August primary, Benson recently drafted legislation, with Senate Democratic Leader Gretchen Whitmer of East Lansing, to improve voting technology for members of the military overseas. The bills are being introduced in the Senate today.

As a Wayne State law professor and political force, Benson leads a very public life by choice. But it is her private life that has risen to the top of her priority checklist.

Her No. 1 mission now is to comfort the man she admires and loves as he serves thousands of miles away.

To believe in the future, even as she saves every email, Facebook post, letter and voice mail in recognition of the risks involved.

When the phone finally rings this day, the conversation is sweet and 51 seconds long. Army Spc. Friedrichs signs off as he has in every conversation since July 22, with a phrase that has become their ritual.

"I am 100 percent: mind, body and spirit," he tells her. It is a statement of reassurance, one that gives no hint or promise of what might come tomorrow.

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