

My wife Carol and I missed the warning signs of our son's depression and just could not see that his illness – if left untreated – was potentially as deadly as if he had had cancer or heart disease." While the Grahams continue to advocate for increased help to Soldiers with mental health problems, it comes with a price.

"Even though Carol and I both made this commitment to keep going, it has not been easy," Graham explained. "I made speeches as Soldiers deployed and redeployed. We celebrated at the welcome home ceremonies and watched as families were reunited after long separations... which left us always wondering how the world could even keep turning without Jeffrey and Kevin in it. At church we tried desperately to hold back the tears as other people's prayers seemingly were answered."

Graham also shared that one of many sources of comfort for his family has

been the friendship and support of his then-boss, Lieutenant General David Valcourt, now the deputy commander at the Training and Doctrine Command.

Although Valcourt had the horrible job of notifying Graham of his son's death in Iraq, he demonstrated his understanding of the Grahams' pain. When Graham was promoted, Valcourt was there to pin the stars on Graham's uniform. But he had engraved a special message on the back of the stars. Kevin's name is engraved on one star and Jeffrey's name is on the other. At the promotion ceremony, Valcourt told Graham, "Your boys will always be with you."

Graham acknowledged that now he wears the stars on his uniform to represent his sons.

"We have pledged to use Kevin's death to raise awareness in the military to the dangers of untreated depression, post-

traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injuries, and other mental health issues," he said. "We are compelled to speak out for all of the 'Kevins' of the world who have no voice."

Graham said there is still a terrible stigma associated with suicide in the Army and in society in general. He asked the leaders in the audience to empower the Army and communities with the education and tools to break through the fear and stigma surrounding suicide.

In closing, Graham asked his audience to remember wounded Soldiers – those with visible wounds as well as those with invisible wounds.

"It has been said that depression is the slow bleeding of the soul, and we must continue to encourage Soldiers to reach out and get help," he said. "Be the tourniquet that stops the bleeding of these priceless souls." \*

## Mark and Carol Graham's Work with T★A★P★S

In the TAPS family we know the devastating sorrow of losing a loved one, but few of us have had the experience of burying not one, but two, sons. Mark and Carol Graham, along with their remaining daughter, Melanie, have carried this extra burden for more than six years, first losing Kevin to suicide in 2003, and then Jeffrey eight months later in combat. The Grahams have seen firsthand how differently the public responds to the circumstances of death.

In the beginning, the Grahams focused on setting up suicide prevention programs on college campuses. But after being invited to talk about Kevin's death at the 2007 TAPS National Military Survivor Seminar, they began to speak openly in the military about suicide prevention.

"TAPS has given us a way to channel our grief in a positive way. Before we connected with TAPS, I was holding my pain on the inside. TAPS connected me with

other dads who were carrying the same pain and loss as I was. Finding TAPS was a huge turning point in our lives," said Mark.

The Grahams are committed to raising awareness to the dangers of untreated depression, post traumatic stress disorder, and other mental health issues, regardless of their own continuing pain. They have also supported TAPS by hosting and giving the keynote addresses for two regional seminars



at Fort Carson, Colorado, in addition to attending the 2009 Gary Morris Invitational Golf Tournament, and the 2009 TAPS Gala where Mark was presented with the TAPS

Honor Guard Leadership Award.

"We desperately needed a safe place to share stories about both Jeffrey and Kevin, a place where we could laugh and cry if we needed to. There is so much love and acceptance in our TAPS family that we can truly share Kevin's story as much as Jeffrey's. And by reaching out to others and helping them to heal, I have found healing myself."

~ Carol Graham