Gold Star Motherhood: Spectacle, Emotion, and Identity Construction

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by

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the dissertation entitled

Gold Star Motherhood: Spectacle, Emotion, and Identity Construction

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DEDICATION

This research is dedicated to the following:

Gold Star families and those who participated in this research.

To my grandmother, Margie “Nan” Holt. Thank you for believing in me.

To my son, Atlas. We can do difficult things.

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ABSTRACT:

This dissertation analyzes experiences of gold star mothers, spectacles of grief, grief politics, organizational embeddedness, and the use of discourses in sense making and social identity mapping of valor revolving around military service member loss. Gold star mothers are those who have lost a child that was serving in the United States military or died as a direct result from active duty in the military. This research takes a mixed method ethnographic approach through in-depth life history interviews, participant observation at four national conventions of gold star mothers over the course of six years, participant observation at local gold star fundraisers, an anonymous survey, and content analysis of the Gold Star Mothers Organization's website and media outlets. In this work, you will learn how the GSMO navigates multiple political landscapes while attending to both the business side of the corporation and the emotional side of being a service organization comprised of bereaved mothers.

INTRODUCTION:

Gold Star families—Gold Star mothers in particular—are organizationally identified as those with a loved one who died in military service. They are the parents, spouses, children, and siblings left behind. In this dissertation, I use an ethnographic and interpretive approach to research gold star families, specifically gold star mothers. I ask, "How do gold star mothers make sense of their lived experiences and gold star stories?" "How do gold star mothers make sense of organization?" "What role does the organization play in members' sense making and identity construction?" In other words, "How do the emotional, familial, and organizational spheres converge?"

Inevitably, these questions lead us to consider the grief politics, which I have broken down as grief in politics and politics of grief. Grief in politics refers to the public expression of grief that may have political impact and that may be used to advocate for or effect rules, codes, laws, and policies. This may be at the local, regional, and national scale. Politics of grief refers to the discussions and spectacles of grief used to maintain systems of power. In the case of gold star mothers, this power is often represented through patriotism and nationalism reinforced by the outward performance and narratives of grief that permeate national beliefs of honor, sacrifice, and gold star families. Politics of grief incorporate the spectacle of grief. For gold star families, that is how gold star grief is paraded through mainstream media, community parades, and patriotic holidays. These are the politics of grief highlighted through public spectacle. Spectacle is not always politics of grief but politics of grief often rely heavily on spectacles of grief.

An example of grief politics would be the families of the U.S.S. Cole bombing that killed 17 Navy sailors on October 12, 2000 (Perl 2001). The families sued the

Sudanese government and won in 2012 (Gannaway 2020). However, the judgement was overruled by the United States Supreme Court in 2019. This is grief in politics as the bereaved families were attempting to impact legislature. Also in 2019, then President Trump posted on the social media platform Twitter, "Our GREAT MILITARY has delivered justice for the heroes lost and wounded in the cowardly attack on the USS Cole. We have just killed the leader of that attack, Jamal al-Badawi. Our work against al Qaeda continues. We will never stop in our fight against radical Islamic terrorism!" (Browne and Starr 2019). The post is politics of grief as the loss of the service members has been vindicated. Within the tweet, national discourses on military legitimacy, honor and valor of service members, sacredness of military loss, and the patriotic duty are reinforced. I discuss these concepts more in chapter five.

Through the methodological process, another question emerged, "How is legacy made and negotiated through these spaces?" I discuss legacy work through this manuscript as meaning making and a way for gold star mothers to preserve the social self of their deceased children. Gold star parents go through a rapid transition of parental roles and perceived responsibilities. Through legacy work, the gold star mother holds onto her child's memory and breathes a form of social life for them after the child's death. The construction and maintenance of the child's legacy is essentially a different type of parenting. Instead of parenting the physical child that was, the mother parents the meaning the child's life had and the purpose their life and loss can still give. I speak more on this throughout the dissertation.

This work is ethnographic in its immersive, thick description of conventions, interactions, and interviews. Adding to this is the use of a layered account, designed to

add more contextual nuance and decenter the myth of complete objectivity by taking into account participant, researcher, and reader positionality. As a layered account, this work slips between time, scenario, and recollections, however, much of the chapters and sections are structured chronologically in terms of life and convention events. We begin with the knock on the door and the acute mourning events, followed by eventual convention participation where I take us day by day through the convention. This is designed to show the transition of parenting and legacy construction as well as the discursive distribution and organizational embeddedness of the GSMO. The knock on the door chapter takes us through that abrupt identity shift from blue star mother to gold with the loss of their child. From there, gold star mothers begin their journey of sensemaking and legacy work. Through the chapters that follow, we see how their child's legacy is constructed, re-constructed, and even co-constructed over time, experience, and interactions. This includes the impact of organizational and national political narratives regarding service member loss, grief, and valor. The following sections further explore transitions of parenthood, discuss the concept of a "good death", address why I chose to focus on mothers rather than fathers or the whole family, and concludes with an outline of following chapters.

Transitions of Parenthood: Deployment, Loss, and Legacy

Peer-reviewed articles on military family bereavement typically focus on the spouse or offspring (Sullivan, Cozza, and Dougherty 2019; Hardaway 2004; Steen and Asaro, 2006; Wright et al. 2006). Work on parental bereavement of active duty loss or "families of the fallen" (Harrington 2017) is often centered on psychological health of parents and siblings (Caroll 2001; Florian 1990; Gay 1982; Ginzburg, Geron, and

Solomon 2002; Rolls and Harper 2016), with some looking at policy implications regarding who and how the initial information is disseminated to the family and the significance of casualty assistance officers (Bartone, 1996; Ender and Hermsen 1996). One study (Harrington 2017) looked at the meaning making processes of families of fallen soldiers from a psychological angle, finding that the public attention of military funerals and ceremonies may prolong accommodations of grief for families, create a segmented self of the deceased – separating their identity as soldier and identity as son/brother/athlete – and the reconstruction of identity parents and siblings undergo exemplified by introducing themselves as their fallen child's parent.

A 2008 study on military reserve families found that families of service members experience an ambiguous absence when their loved one is on mission (Faber et al.) There is a complexity of the service members psychological presence and their physical absence. As a result, family members in the study reported daily thoughts of their loved one's wellbeing and a practice of heightened communication anytime a bombing, attack, or something indicating risk occurs. During deployment, parents struggle with transitioned parental roles and boundaries surrounding the deployment. They are no longer the sole authority of their child's life and are limited in terms of knowledge, contact, and control (Crow et al. 2016). For a group of mothers in the USSR (Gabel, 2015), ownership of their child triumphed over the strict governmental regime when the mothers journeyed to their sons' camp and physically removed them from their station. As much as many mothers might want to, this is an unrealistic endeavor for most families of service members. What happens when said child does not return or dies by service

related causes? How does the meaning of motherhood and family alter? And how is that reconstructed across the years, through decades of interactions and re-enactments?

One of the toughest things reported for families was the inability to know or control whether their son or daughter was alive, injured, dead, or missing (Faber et al 2008). When it comes to service member loss, grieving parents may have complicated and disenfranchised grief, meaning they may have more difficulty participating in everyday life and may struggle with acute feelings of grief longer than our general societal norms. My participants will tell you there is no gold standard for grief and that a mother never "gets over it". It is, after all, their child they are mourning.

In an experiment with bereaved and nonbereaved parents (control group), Florian (1990) found bereaved parents are more likely to score lower on meaning of life and purpose of life tests. There was no difference in regards to length of grief, meaning those who lost their child 2 years ago had similar scores to those who lost their child 10 years prior. How bereaved parents made sense of their experiences impacted their decisions to continue living and in turn influenced the coping mechanisms. (Schiff, et al. 2020).

While not parent specific, Neimeyer, Baldwin, and Gillies (2006) found that continuing bonds with the deceased increases trauma and distress among survivors unless they are able to attribute significant meaning to the loss. This meaning may be through spiritual, personal, or practical means. Through service and legacy work, gold star mothers are actively restructuring their bonds and creating nuanced meaning of their child's life, loss, and remembrance. Legacy construction, legacy work, and legacy making are the practices of ensuring one is remembered through strategic actions and behaviors (Akard et al. 2018). Those with terminal illness, those who are bereaved, and

those who want to be remembered may all engage in legacy making. The mother is able to find meaning in her experiences of who the child was, how they died, and the legacy moving forward via the work the mother completes in their child's name. Acts of service, scholarships, and foundations in their child's names go on to create additional meaning for others and continue the legacy work for the mother. Through legacy making, the mother establishes their child's social self after death, commemorates what may be seen as a "good", honorable, or admirable death, and symbolically keeps their child alive through remembrance (Buckle and Flemming, 2011; Hallam, Hockey, and Howarth, 2005). Agency of the dead reside in the narratives of a survivor. It is the survivor who stories intention, meaning, and action for the deceased. Through support groups, formal paperwork, foundation building, service work, and social interactions – legacy work – the survivor constructs and maintains the social life or social self of the deceased (Hallam et al 2005).

A "good" death

In a 2016 content analysis for scholarly articles referencing "good deaths", Meier et al (2016) found 11 common themes for considering something as a good death. The top three were 1.) preference of process, 2.) pain-free, and 3.) emotional wellbeing. For military death, Hallam et al (2011) includes the ability to view the body as another important component of the good death. Service members with nothing left to return or members who remain missing in action hinder closure and contest whether the loss was in a good death – fast, honorable, emotionally stable, and intact. As we discuss in later chapters, how a child died matters in political and social ways for members of the Gold

Star Organization. It can be argued that in their constructed hierarchies of death, the members are stratifying the "goodness" of their children's deaths.

As I type this, I consider how a mother reading this might interpret the use of "good" in death. A good death does not mean that there is not loss, grief, and trauma too. It means that if one must die, these factors are preferable over others. There may be comfort in knowing that a loved one died painlessly, quickly, without realizing it, saving another, or aiding others. There may be additional trauma in knowing that a loved one died in agony, slowly, in fear, or by their own means.

Through this literature are gaps in understanding the grief of a parent when their adult child has passed and the experiences specific to gold star families. Individual participants and the representatives of the national Gold Star Mothers Organization (a pseudonym) all mention the lack of visibility and knowledge of gold star families. Through them, we gain insight into the long term personal impacts of war, the processing of sudden deaths, and have an opportunity to investigate mothers from war cohorts – each with their individual meanings and context related to the war. We also gain nuanced views in manner of death and how a "good death" is negotiated in a space that prides itself on its "common bond". Good death comes into play when discussing both legacy building and membership belonging.

Why mothers?

Mothers have long been cast as the caretakers, nurturers, and keepers of the home. They are the ones tasked with instilling cultural values and raising responsible children. While cultural trends are shifting and the role of fathers and other caregivers are expanding in this regard, much of the pressure still permeates throughout motherhood

narratives, and young children are still largely socialized with expectations of these gender based parenting roles. A 2016 study explored the pressures of motherhood ideals and its impact on psychological health (Henderson, Harmon, and Newman). Surveying 283 mothers across the United States, findings indicate both awareness and an internalization of the pressures of motherhood expectations. Even mothers who do not subscribe to the "perfect mother" ideals still reported feeling stressed, anxious, and at time guilt for not meeting these social standards of motherhood. We have long associated mothers with the primary caregiver of their child and expected her to prioritize children and family above all else (Borelli, et al. 2017; Hays, 1996; Liss, et al. 2013; Meeussen and Van Laar 2018; Newman and Henderson, 2014). While children may bond with fathers, it is the bond between a mother and child that we glorify as a deep, unconditional, almost spiritual or soul linked bond. The societal pressures in terms of child rearing responsibilities unequally distribute toward women. In social media, memes and posts now encourage parents to tell their children that if they are ever lost to not just find an adult, but find a mother. This is because mothers are storied as uniquely protective of children. What happens then, when a mother loses that child?

> I try to do my best by my kids and make sure they were safe and fed and all of that. You always want to protect them and I couldn't be with him to protect him. So, knowing, and having people send me pictures and every bit of knowledge about him is a little piece of him. – Dorothy

That knowledge is then incorporated to a grieving mothers new task of legacy construction.

In, "Theatres of War", Scheyer (2021) begins by speaking to the historical role of mothers and women lovers in mourning. Scheyer posits that traditionally a fallen soldier's death is not perceived as real or complete until they have been mourned by a

woman. It is argued that it is the woman's role to express grief for herself, family, and community through dress, tears, manner, and public grief. In our own modern representations of military funerals on television shows and movies, the emotional climax occurs when the woman – wife or mother – dressed in black, possibly veiled, in the front row, receives the folded American flag. Within the Gold Star Organization, emphasis is put on the mother's role in honoring and remembering their children. It is through her tears, will, and determination that her child's legacy will continue.

Another reason to focus on mothers is the access to the nationally recognized organizational group centered on gold star mothers. When asked, fathers I have spoken with explain, "There just isn't a Gold Star Father's group." While some have chartered them, "they just don't last long."

Founded as a veteran's service organization in 1929, GSMO has been instrumental in getting national bills passed and raising funds for veterans' services (Fenelon 2010). A member of the executive board serves on the national Veteran's Affairs executive board every year, thus having a wider impact into the everyday lives of United States Veterans. This organization was founded by and still comprised of women who have lost a son or daughter in active duty military. They come together across generations of war and conflicts to grieve, to heal, to serve, and to perpetuate the legacy of their service members (Fenelon 2010). While there are efforts and small groups for gold star fathers and gold star siblings, they are not as consistently involved as GSMO.

Outline of Chapters

Gold star families continue living after the plane crashes, the ship sinks, the IED explodes. They decide how their loved one's stories are remembered. This work aims to

give voice to a largely unheard and unnoticed group, to explore the everyday lives and meaning making among mothers and family members who have lost a service member, and to investigate the organizational and group dynamics of those belonging to the American Gold Star Mothers, Inc. This research explores symbolic interaction situated in context, everyday lived experiences, social marking, and organizational embeddedness, interpretations of deservingness, and looking at a parallel between national and organizational narratives of military bereavement juxtaposed with religious themes. This research yields additional insight to areas of sense making, linkages of group affiliation in terms of organizational embeddedness in individual meaning-making, and in organizational policy making.

In the chapters that follow, loss is presented in a world of a particular going concern. For Sociologist Everett Hughes, interaction was institutional and ecological (1971). People make sense of their worlds in part based on their interactions with institutions and their relationships within them. These social institutions influence social construction and reconstruction. For Gold Star Mothers, the going concerns are found through analyzing narratives of loss through organizational embeddedness, and their contribution to family, the self, politics, and policy. Helmes-Hayes (2010) argues that the act of conducting research is its own going concern. Research investigators must adapt to the institutional and ecological contexts of their field site. They must learn and adopt meaning in their actions while attempting to sort out the meaning making and constructions among participants. For, me, this included learning language, rituals, music, and practicing emotional resilience. The site of storytelling – including the convention as a mecca of gold star storytelling – is an emotionally expressive space. These emotions

switch rapidly, requiring others to engage adaptively and evoke an emotional stamina. Many of the stories shared are sad, tragic, and may read as graphic at times.

The chapters below follow life event patterns and the convention. Chapter one lays out the analytic framework drawing on symbolic interactionism, language, and emotion. Chapter two describes the methodology used in conducting this research. This is a qualitative project and participant observation and interviews were the primary methods. Chapter three reviews a brief history of the gold star and the Gold Star Mother's Organization. In chapter four, we begin the gold star journey with the dreaded "knock on the door". Largely a symbolic phrase, this section addresses the lived experience and sense making of gold star mothers when learning of their child's death. We peek retroactively at these moments of shock, sometimes denial, and acute grief. Participants' recollections guide us to the next stages of "picking up" their children, funeral services, and adjusting to life without their child.

Chapter five collects the baton and analyzes the politics and spectacle of grief. We hear how mothers' trauma is televised and used in the public sphere. With political holidays, mothers are asked to revisit their loss – publicly – for patriotic purposes. Chapter six takes us to the convention, a 3-4 day long sequence of emotionally and mentally demanding events. We are greeted with joy and experience the rapidly shifting tones of each event – memorial, tourism, business, banquet, effervescence. Woven through each are the strands of individual grief, meaning making, and legacy construction. In chapter seven, I discuss marking and belonging within the organization and the social hierarchy of loss that members construct in formal and informal ways. Through this, mothers plot themselves on an identity map of valor. Chapter eight wraps

up the convention through remembrance events and more legacy construction. I conclude in Chapter nine with participants' advice on grief and discussion of what it means to be a gold star mother. Interspersed are longer stories of select participants along with reflections from the researcher. These are designed to provide additional insight and information.

The stories and experiences of gold star mothers are not linear. They jump around in an ordered chaos from past, present, and future, overlapping with site, meaning, and time, then diverging with the same. To best represent this complexity, I have written this manuscript in a manner that blends history, loss, theory, methodology, meaning making, and legacy building.

CHAPTER ONE: ANALYTIC FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework of the study relates to longstanding ideas dealing with the everyday construction of identity, especially its emotional contours and, in turn, how that is increasingly organizationally embedded. While each gold star mother has their lived experience of loss, grief, and a new normalcy, they are not alone or novel in how they interpret these tragedies. National narratives and organizational narratives from the Gold Star Mother's Organization shape the stocks of knowledge and sense making tools for gold star mothers. Those who are not members of GSMO are still represented by the organization on national levels and effected by policies, campaigns, and legislature related to the organization. Those who are members, receive heavier flow of discourses embedded within the organization that manage the constructions of motherhood, valor, deservingness, honor, and gold star. Similar to the care facilities outlined in Gubrium's work on organizational embeddedness (Gubrium 1987;1992) The organization relies on formalized metrics such as the definition from the Department of Defense, organizational bylaws, missions, and bills to narratively control who is allowed to officially identify as a gold star mother and what that should mean to members. As such, gold star sense making is itself a "going concern" (Hughes 1984; Gubrium and Holstein 2000). A going concern is a pattern of interaction that orders discursive environments – places of interaction with particular interpretive perspectives – and influences one's self and identity (Gubrium and Holstein 2000). The formal rules from the United States government, from the GSMO, and the narratives embedded in both organizations effect the available discourses and interpretive tools that a newly minted mother may have to reconstruct their personal self. This does not mean that a mother cannot buck against these narratives. They do in and

out group, as I discuss later with the case of Cindy Sheehan – who I refer to as a cultural atheist going against the secular sacredness of patriotic narratives – and with mothers working in the group to expand definitions and categories of belonging.

Mead (1934) argues that language is a process that forms from attitudes and response (p 14). Language, analyzed through gestures, exists to express feelings, desires, and operates as a vehicle of interaction through which we make sense of the world. Using the example of an angry actor to demonstrate how language is used shows that it not only expresses feelings but also conveys evidence of a feeling (p 17). Mead argues the whole of the interaction (group of actions, the doing) must work to give words meaning. Language is part of the social behavior, organizing what occurs, rather than establishing a preexisting and obdurate meaning. It is not simply words spoken in a vacuum, but takes into account the situatedness of the interaction. With each conversation, each experience, each day, we fluidly shift our interpretations and create meanings for the situation at hand. Through communication with one another, we forge and maintain relationships (Baxter, 2004; Metts and Asbury, 2014) that are co-constructed in the interacting narratives (Cameron and Gillien, 2013; Metts and Asbury, 2014; Thompson et al. 2009)

During interactions, outside stimuli, such as challenges, stressors, events, and new distractions may occur. Mead argues that the interactants must then adjust to the stimuli, and the way they decide to do so occurs through interactions. For example, a conversation is taking place between two people, wherein they are deciding how to address a concerned friend. A person walks up and begins talking to the first two. The original interactants have a choice, in the moment, in how they react to this third person. They may choose to make small talk until the person walks away, include the person in

the conversation already taking place, or ignore the third person. Doing so both reflects the relationship the first two have to the circumstance and the third person, and it influences how the relationship is interpreted further in that moment and in the recollection. If the person is a good friend who they choose to ignore, the friend may question whether the friendship is still there and to what extent might it be injured? Mead suggests we organize stimuli in reference to others. In doing so, we choose which responses take place.

Meaning, even of the past, is constructed in its present experience through how people treat objects and others based on the meaning they have for them; the meaning one has is established and reestablished during the interaction, and through the management of meanings by the interactants based on their interpretations within the moment (Blumer, 1964). The meaning exists in the moment of narrating their experience. If asked to describe the same experience on a different time or place, the meaning may be different. This memory work is pertinent when speaking to the past, particularly loss and grief (Brennan, 2008). Mead (1934) argues that people may use rational conduct to anticipate actions or take responsibility for an upcoming act. The meaning of the actions are not fully formulated until after the act has ended, and through memory, meaning is made.

For Foucault (1969), language is power constituted through discourse. Foucault argues that discourse creates the self, “truth”, history, and genealogy. It differentiates the hero from the villain and the savage from the saint. Through temporality, in the sense that he posits, we understand our past via our present. Discursive power encompasses an omni-present understanding of how things work. It consists of norms, bureaucracy, and

medicalization, the things "they" say. These discourses infiltrate us like strings on a puppet, influencing our every move. They maintain decorum at banks, control bodies, and influence our conceptions on family.

For example post World War I, then President Woodrow Wilson faced an optics challenge of national morale. Families reeled from wartime and many suffered a loss of someone they knew. Parents of fallen soldiers mourned. After a correspondence with one proud mother (Fenlon, 2010), a national effort to establish a strong discourse of sacrifice provided meaning-making tools for bereaved families, constructing what would soon become a gold star family and the identity characteristics that accompany that. This new discursive identity of gold star families established the foundation for the future reality work of gold star families for years to come. Reality work suggests that people construct their realities while crafting their identities (Gubrium, 1992). For instance, as a mother begins taking on and internalizing the meaning she has for her Gold Star membership, she molds her identity as a Gold Star Mother while simultaneously solidifying her reality as one.

Discourses of Emotion

Gubrium (1989) posits that emotional discourse, while recognized within social research, is not studied in depth. Reviewing four foundational theories of emotion, Kemper (1978), Shott (1979), Hochschilds (1979) and Denzin (1984), Gubrium demanded an exploration into the concrete emotional experience "in its own right" (p 263). In this section, I review the programs and solutions outlined in this work to demonstrate how emotional discourses can be used connecting them to family emotions in empirical research.

Kemper 1978 and later in 1981 believed emotions generate physiological occurrences which exist regardless of interpretation and understanding. Shott (1979) argues that feelings are both physiological and cognitively labeled. One must have some recognition that one emotion is the most appropriate explanation for a state of arousal. What is felt is not determined by rules or interpretations; It is only guided by them. For Schott, the sociological relevance of sentiments is most evident in role-taking emotions. For example, shame, guilt, and embarrassment, according to Schott, facilitate social control as they encourage one to engage in self-control. This ensures that the behavior of people fit within social norms even when there is no direct benefit or punishment to them.

Hochschilds (1979; 1983) argues for the observation of the experience of emotions in relation to social worlds. Discourses of emotion exist through framing rules, feeling rules, and are reflected in emotion work. Through framing rules, we have a guide for what the appropriate emotional connection is for a given situation. They provide social context for emotional meetings and situations. Classrooms should hold attention and generate focus. A therapist's office is the place where one should be open about their inner selves. Confusion may occur when we do not have clear rules for a given situation. Should one express anxiety to a co-worker? Would that jeopardize their reputation or would it increase their bond?

Feeling rules demonstrate what is okay and expected for one to feel in a given situation. These rules inform the performance of that emotion, through tears, mourning clothes, or loud bursts of laughter. One feels excited when trying something new, expresses sadness at a funeral, signals joy after a birth. When we fail to follow these and other framing rules and feeling rules for a given situation, others subject us to social

control and emotional management. Feeling or expressing the wrong emotion for the circumstance, ruminating (Afifi et al. 2013) for an extended length of time, or displacing emotion onto someone or something else are all breaches in the societal values and codes constructed by feeling rules. For instance, new mothers expressing little interest in their new born baby, who indicate sadness beyond the "baby blues" (American Pregnancy Association, 2015; Kammerer et al. 2009) may be checked for post-partum depression.

Emotion work occurs when one becomes aware of the framing and feeling rules that structure our lives, recognizes that they do not match them, and makes an effort to either change their emotion through deep acting, or at least perform the appropriate emotion through surface acting. Expanding on feeling rules are emotion codes (Loseke 2009). Emotion codes are codes or rules that order when, how, where, and what emotions are appropriate, to whom they should be directed, and for how long these should be outwardly expressed. These may be conveyed to others in an attempt at evoking the desired emotion from them. Techniques for emotion work include changing one's thoughts, bodily postures, and facial expressions. In the former, changing thoughts may be attempted through evoking the appropriate emotion for oneself and suppressing the inappropriate one.

Studies on political communication find audiences respond more positively when they feel emotionally connected to the message (Grader 2005; Loseke 2009; Roser and Thompson 1995). The beauty and tragedy of gold star families in the public/political sphere is they could be anyone. Military families, veterans, retirees, people with young children who could join the military, or even someone who knows and cares about someone in service may feel linked to the gold star families. The mothers are teachers,

real estate agents, stay at home caregivers, etc. They are your average Joes, and their stories often tap into any parent's darkest fear – losing a child. The children of gold star mothers could be anyone too. They might look like a young relative, have played similar sports, or represent culture, safety, and inspiration, connecting the viewer on an emotional level to their loss.

Denzin (1984) argues that emotions are self-feeling, or lived emotionality. Emotions occur as embodied experiences, where the body does not call out interpretations but instead acts as the locus of adjustments to emotional consciousness. Nobody can know what you are feeling as you are the only one who can possibly feel it. The body does not yell that you are angry just because your blood pressure has raised and your fists clench. You feel the extent of this anger and know its meaning in the unique moment. For Denzin, your experience of anger or emotion is private and individualized; One cannot truly understand what another feels and experiences. Gubrium (1989) critiques Denzin by arguing that if this is the case, how do we know that emotions are real at all then? If there is no cultural understanding of, say anger, shame, guilt, then how do we know that anger, shame, and guilt even exist? There must be some sense of language or emotion for us to convey that those emotions exist. As Mead (1934) states, social interactions and meanings inform and are informed through language. Likewise, cultural understandings and emotive discourses convey emotions.

Gubrium (1989) describes emotion work as craft. Emotion work in this iteration differs from Hochschilds (1979), and instead the viewpoint establishes emotion work as craft wherein it is reality productive just as much as reality reactive. "Skillful activation of activities serve to plan, produce, appreciate, and indulge the felt products of its labor,

emotional labor" (Gubrium, 1989). People experience feelings based on their own interpretations and understandings of what they believe they feel. Gubrium argues that discovery rules are engaged to explore feeling in a given situation. Unlike feeling rules which are designed to point one toward what they should and should not feel, discovery rules emphasize what one actually feels in the moment. Gubrium engages with empirical data on Alzheimer's patients and caregivers to demonstrate the importance of discovery emotions for the patients who may or may not be non-verbal, and for the caregivers and loved ones who are experiencing stressors, strains, and emotions that arise from the affliction of Alzheimer's on patients and within the family.

Emotional discourse aides the connections between patients and caregivers, providing both with adequate tools to better the understanding of themselves and each other. For the patients, selves are no longer the same. It becomes difficult if not impossible to adequately verbalize emotions. Caregivers engage in tone and touch to attempt to understand what the patient is feeling. These gestures serve as their own language, constructing meaning for what the patient may be feeling. For caregivers, the emotional toll of losing the person they knew is sometimes indescribable. The physiological feelings and concrete emotions exist, but the words to appropriately convey the unique inner feeling disappear. Gubrium describes poetic discourse as a tool in these situations, wherein patients speak to and on their emotions through poetic prose either written themselves or borrowed from others. In my research, gold star families also use emotive discourse through poetry, music, written letters, and quotes to paint a picture of what they believe someone who has not experienced the loss of a child could not possibly know. They also use writings, works, and interpretations of their children to construct

how their deceased children felt or would feel about ongoing moments. These interpretations assist the gold star mother in constructing her child's legacy and social existence post physical death – here referred to as a social life.

This research journeys through a conversation with Gubrium, Denzin, Hochschilds, and Loeske. At the convention level, emotion codes, emotional order, feeling rules, and framing are crucial to the maintenance of the convention and the organization itself. As the events shift, so do the rules, frames, and codes, requiring an acute attention and emotional resilience in order to match. Adaptability is necessary between these shifts and when an emotion code is breached. At the individual and group levels, emotions themselves are experienced in both a Denzin and a Gubrium sense. As I describe later with a contra dance, the emotions are shared collectively with other members who know the loss of a child – referred to by participants as a common bond. Through the social encounters and organizational embeddedness, members shape and reshape identities, responses, and feelings based on those around them and the information at hand. At times, they may interpret a sign or symbol as something from a divine or higher power signaling pride, acceptance, and love on the group as a whole. Within this social aspect, the mothers are still individuals with unique social positions, relationships, parental histories, and circumstances. In this sense, their emotional experience only fully felt by themselves even if others are experiencing a similar version.

Family as everyday language embedded in diverse discourses

One of the first things any undergraduate student learns in a sociology of the family course is that the family is an institution (Farrell, 2018;). Family is a group of people connected biologically, legally, or through affection. In the latter sense, family is

what one considers itself to be. Roles are constructed and reconstructed, dictated by institutional norms. Family is influenced by structures of race (Collins, 2002; 1986; Orbe, 1999; Soliz, Thorson, and Rittenour, 2009), class (Hill, 2012; Lareau, 2003; Pugh, 2009), gender (Hochschilds, 1989), and sexuality (Kimport, 2014; Suter et al. 2016), to name a few.

Phillip Cohen (2018) states multiple institutional arenas affect family. The family arena is the private sphere where family is constructed and performed. The state arena can be experienced through governmental and political effects on families, such as legal definitions of what constitutes a marriage, barriers for international adoption, complicated processes for the foster care system, and requirements for governmental aide and family welfare assistance. The third arena is the market arena. Here, capitalist and consumer practices influence the family in terms of resources, decisions, and potential outcomes. Hefty costs of childcare (Neighmond, 2016), inflation on rental properties (Sherman, 2018), employment levels, and fluctuations in gasoline costs all contribute to the vacations, activities of the family, symbolic indulgences or deprivations (Pugh, 2009), living situations, and time spent with family. The market economy impacts decisions like single versus dual income earners – can the family afford for both partners to be gainfully employed?

This family as institution is not static. It is continuously reshaped and given new meaning (Beeghley 1996; Bouvard, 2013; Story, 2014). For instance, families in stressful times are influenced by cultural, historical, hereditary, developmental, and economic constraints (Boss, 2002; Maguire, 2014). The context shapes and reshapes who they are and how they will cope with the stress. Likewise, a family's organization, values, and

interpretations of the events construct the meaning they have and the coping mechanisms in which they will engage. These stressors and challenges aide in shaping the family (Gubrium, 1988). Experiences like loss, windfalls, upheavals, and addition of new members shift the dynamics of family life. For example, returning from service and reintegrating within the family may impact the way service members interact with their romantic partners and make decisions on their relationships (Crow et al 2016; Faber et al 2008; Theiss and Knobloch, 2013).

Gubrium (1988) describes an ongoing process of family as project, referring to the meanings and interpretations constructed within and reflecting the family. Using a Durkheimian model of collective representations (Durkheim, 1947), Gubrium argues that it is through public discourse and discursive practices that family is constructed and maintained as "family in the large" (p 274), the unit as an entity rather than a collection of individuals, that is "built out of as well as reflecting domestic affairs" (p 274). Through the examination of challenges and troubles, sociologists analyze how the family in the large operates as an active agent in everyday life. Diverse discourses and circumstances construct the family order and ideal types, particularly through discourses of domestic affairs. These discourses are created and managed by family members, professionals, and institutions (Gubrium, 1988; Gubrium, 1987; Gubrium and Lynott, 1985).

It is important to consider a discursive approach to families, and how that embeddedness can operate in the family at large. To do this, we continue to consider family as project and as generated and maintained through everyday language and discourse. In the case of gold star mothers, family, motherhood, parenthood, sons,

daughters, even interpretations of past and present relationships are influenced by social discourses. The mother's relationship to her deceased child, the child's relationship and bond with family members, is constructed family identity shaped through discourse and interpretation. How the family shifts after the loss is also shaped by cultural expectations and interpretive practice. What is a gold star mother supposed to do? What does motherhood mean when their adult child is no longer here? How do they navigate motherhood and family with their surviving family? Discourses on family permeate our society. They are heard through mommy blogs, parental guides, arguments on the role of fathers, gender disputes on raising children and more. Family as language is politicized through discourses on values, rhetoric aligning habits and beliefs with political and religious agenda (Granek, 2014). Family councils and institutions set out to inform policy and change. Within our everyday language, what it means to identify as a family or family member, to be part of a family, and to make sense of one's family unit is forged, negotiated, and re-shaped (Daly, 2003; Whitchurch and Dickson, 1999).

The Gold Star Mothers Organization is a formal, government sanctioned institution that actively shapes what it means to be a mother to a fallen service member. It instills within its organizational community the purpose of honor, of remembering and creating a legacy. These notions swirl around as organizationally embedded discourses. For a parent to a young child, the primary focus is on keeping the baby alive. As a gold star mother, the importance of constructing legacy means the mother prevents or puts off their loved one's social death for as long as possible. Afterall, gold star mothers believe there are two types of death – the initial physical death of the body, and the death that occurs when memory is lost and there is nobody left to say their child's name. Even if a

mother doesn't feel this way when entering the organization, it is a saying and a belief that they become embedded with. In a 2008 study on Israeli gold star families, Malkinson and Bar-tur found that the importance of remembrance and creating this legacy – or eternalizing the child as the authors described it – grew stronger as the mother aged. The older and nearer death the mother became, the more important it was to say their child's name and hope that they would be remembered. Again, taking the concept of the social death and the mother's responsibility of it, the death of the mother signifies the final death of the child.

Through interactions parents may think of themselves in terms of values – a good parent, an attentive parent, an open parent. Family interactions establish the reliability of communication patterns (Whitchurch and Dickson, 1999). Research employing a discursive approach to the everyday lives of families yield insight into how language and meaning are experienced across nuanced situations. It captures the feeling and significance of those discourses in the moment, and investigates how those discourses lead to an expression of meaning.

Consider that since 1776, over 1,100,290 active duty service men and women in the United States have lost their lives in wars, conflicts, and operations (DMDC, 2017; DeBruyne, 2017). This number does not include those missing in action, confederate soldiers, or those active duty members not grounded in a war, conflict, or operation at the time of their deaths. Faced with a mosaic of emotions families left behind experiences – grief, despair, numbness, love, loss, pride, joy, happiness: memories and linking objects (Gabel, 2015; Volkan, 1981). Participants have described the day to day living after the loss of a child as "living without air", "making it one second at a time", "drowning",

"dying". They use the word "new normal" (Buckle and Fleming, 2011) to convey their adjustment. At times, mothers rely on quotes they remember from other mothers on the internet, in books, or television. A popular photo is shared on their individual and organizational social media pages. It is a large metal statue of a grieving mother with a hollow stomach. There is no inside. There is just the shell. This becomes symbolic, akin to the roses, the flags, and the star shaped pins often adorning a gold star mother's chest.

Language, discourse, and organizationally embedded discourses are tools used by and on gold star mothers to interpret their lived experiences. These shape their memories of their previous family dynamic, help transfer into words the immensity of their loss, sculpt their narratives of family, motherhood, and grief, and aide in the construction of their deceased child's social life and legacy, thus also reshaping the mother's identity. Embedded narratives from the mainstream and from the Gold Star Mothers Organization shape and reify the mother's interpretive and communicative toolkit. They push political agendas and depend on a belief system akin to a national religion as I will later discuss. The embeddedness for organization members appears so entwined that it becomes a chicken and egg conversation. Did the organization adopt their stances, phrases, and interpretations from the mothers or vice versa? Below the surface, there are breaks from many of the common narratives pushed at organizational conventions. Speaking to non-members further expands the gap between organizational narratives and individual gold star experiences.

Going forward

Standing inside a large hotel conference room, a mother approaches me. She is maybe in her 50's, wearing all white, with short possibly permed reddish hair. She greets

me with a smile and a gentle touch on the arm. “I have something for you” she says in a low tone so as not to disturb those around us. “For me?” I ask. She hands me a wooden plaque. “I make these and wanted you to have this one.” She hands me the small rectangle shaped block. Burned into the wood are the words, “Memories are timeless treasures of the heart”. She shared that crafting these are a way for her to share a bit of herself and honor her only son’s legacy. It is part of her legacy making and gives her a characteristic of interest within the organization. She is the one who makes the plaques. The quotes she chooses instill the organizational initiatives of remembrance and through it she performs her identity of gold star mother.

I explore a juxtaposition of life, loss, and creating a legacy. The mothers I have spoken with have all talked about the impact of loss, creating new traditions and routines, hanging onto mementos or linking objects (Gabel, 2015; Volkan, 1981) that connect them with their child. Identity loss in families (Weigart and Hastings 1977) looks at how loss shifts our individual self-identities – a transition gold star families undergo. When a son dies, are you still a mother? What does it mean to be a mother to the deceased? How is that relationship and responsibility re-worked? In this sense, family is project – referring to the meanings and interpretations constructed within and reflecting the family, potentially influenced by organizational narratives (Gubrium 1988).

Using an interpretive approach from symbolic interaction, I explore how mothers make sense of their experiences as Gold Star Mothers as they recall pre-loss family dynamics, reflect on the initial grieving and identity shift, and analyze the role of organizational membership identity in their constructions. Every mother who has lost a child through active duty becomes a gold star mother automatically. But, not all gold star

mothers choose to join the organization of Gold Star Mothers. Those who do become members take on the organizational dress, bylaws, and practices. As they increase their roles within group, their organizational membership identity expands to officer, representative, past national or state officer, and so on. Through group interactions like national conventions and in retelling events, we explore how meaning, tone, and the emotionally expressive landscape shifts in the moment and how that is reflected upon and made sense of later.

Merging and diverging roles are also at play for gold star mothers with identities linked to membership, organizational role, and relationships with other members (Stryker 2008). Members are known by their membership, role within the organization, death cohort, how their child died, and how they carry on legacy. Meaning and identities are contested and accepted in formal and informal ways and vary on space. What is included at a local or state level may not be welcome at the national and what the national dictates may differ from a state or local chapter. Symbolic interaction highlights the negotiation of groups to co-construct their shared understanding of their social worlds and how our group affiliations shapes our sensemaking (Fine and Tavory 2019).

Considering identity claims of gold star mothers, I take into account the site of the presentation (Goffman 1959), couching the meaning making and narrative work within its contexts of gold star mothers, our national moment, and the Gold Star Mothers Organization. Uniforms, scripts, organized events and written expectations and missions influence the performance and self-interpretation of gold star mothers. Group authenticity – that is their values, missions, beliefs, perception – is maintained through elements of sameness (Brekhus 2020). Authenticity is regarded as a "social accomplishment, an

interactional performance, or a narrative claim" (p 76). It is an ongoing performance. Group sameness for members of the Gold Star organization is regarded frequently in appearance, ritual, mission, and in the notion of a common bond. Through this bond, this sameness, other organizational components of sameness are crafted and maintained. It is through this adherence that the organization controls its reputation and group authenticity as dutiful, grateful, patriotic mothers.

National cultural discourses wrap around mothers creating a spectacle of death and patriotic and motherly duty to carry on a legacy of honor for their children. Organizational conventions yield unstructured therapeutic moments to talk about loss, and draw its presence through various rituals and events. Sharing these emotional stories serves as reinforcing the common bond. While their stories differ, they share in the loss. Meaning making is then influenced through the national political agendas, organizational initiatives, significant family and public events, history, and organizational and familial rituals. The national narratives of military loss are co-constructed with the Gold Star Mothers Organization, providing an opportunity to see the role of organizational narratives of loss as embedding and shaping those interpretations and self-identities for gold star mothers. This is seen through conversations of legacy work, deservingness – who counts in the organization – pledges of upholding patriotic duty, and through the narrative staging of military bereavement as a religious parallel.

CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGY

I used qualitative multi-methods with a grounded theory approach. Grounded theory is an empirical research methodology coined by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in their book *Discovering Grounded Theory* (1967) and expanded on by Kathy Charmaz (2014). This methodology allows researchers to enter into the field without preconceived theoretical expectations. In a Glaserian sense, researchers explore what emerges, leaving themselves open to any and everything being included as data. Then from a more pragmatic and constructivist view, the emergent findings are interpreted and co-constructed as theories between the participant's stories and the researcher's sense-making (Charmaz 2014; Ramalho et al. 2015). I take inspiration from coding processes outlined in Kathy Charmaz's book *Constructing Grounded Theory* (2014 p 43-71). Grounded theorists rely on recordings, transcriptions, memos, and write-ups for waves of codes, concept building, sorting concepts into categories, and then transforming categories into analytic theories. I approached data through multiple levels of coding, beginning with initial coding, looking for emergent codes and concepts among the transcripts. I then delved further into the data by performing a more focused thematic coding. Aligned with Charmaz, recordings and transcriptions along with memos and notes were seminal in theory construction. My use of grounded theory follows more of Charmaz's writings and teachings from her workshop on doing grounded theory at the 2017 Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction (SSSI) convention.

Semi-structured life-history interviews were conducted, asking participants to tell their "gold star story", whatever that means for them. I engaged in the following: a participant observation at the national convention and at GSMO events as a means of

gaining more insight into organizational components and interactions among members, an online content analysis of the organizational Facebook page and website to better understand organizational takes on current and political events, and a demographical survey with both closed and light open-ended questions designed to get an idea of what the organization means to participants. The sections below expand on each methodological approach.

Participants

Participants are gold star mothers who lost a son or daughter that was serving in active duty in the United States military. The mothers that I have interviewed range in experience, time, race, origin story, socio-economic status, and conflict era. Some are the sacred Vietnam moms who serve as "role models" to the younger moms. "If they can go 50, 60 years like this, then it gives me hope," a participant, Shelly, commented during breakfast while others nodded in agreement. Some are mothers from in-between times, missions that were not originally seen as dangerous. "Before there was 9/11, there was 10/12." – Mona, participant. Many came with the influx of Iraq and Afghanistan casualties, picking up the torches and white roses that the World War and Korean moms had carried prior. Participants represent service cohorts formed during Vietnam, Desert Storm, pre-9/11, and post 9/11. Not all participants are KIA (killed in action) moms. Some participants lost children through accident, training accidents, illness, and friendly fire. Now, a new group of gold star mothers are beginning to receive their pins with contestation as they hold the haunting nickname of "suicide moms", or those whose service member or veteran child died by service related suicide. Participants were spread throughout the United States including the South, East Coast, West Coast, North East,

North West, Mid-West, and Central United States. They are majority white, with two who were black and one who was latinx. Ages ranged from the mid-40's until their 90's. Interview appointments were made across four different time zones.

Field Site

Participant observation and additional interviews were conducted at the Gold Star Mothers Organization's national convention. Four years of conventions are referred to. The first are referenced in this researchers experiences and recollection with understanding norms and establishing rapport. The latter two are where the bulk of the data comes from, as they are where I was introduced as a researcher and that became my organizing role.

National conventions take place in urban cities based on the current organizational president's choice. Three of the conventions took place in the Southern United States. One convention took place on the West Coast. Conventions last approximately four jam packed days. Multiple events are organized including tourist trips, business meetings, memorials, entertainment, and a final banquet. Politicians, business men, celebrities, and American heroes are invited to speak and take part in some of the ceremonies. There are typically between one hundred to one hundred and fifty mothers plus their families at each convention.

Interviews

I conducted life-history interviews with GSMO members and non-member gold star families. Life history interviews allow the participant the freedom to speak about their life experiences. This approach benefits the participants by serving as a means of comprehending and rationalizing their biographies (Kroger 2007). "Language is the text

out of which identities are constructed, justified, and maintained." (Kroger 2007: 22; McAdams 1988). Narratives also serve as a way of applying social laws, mores, and roles within the actor's reality (McAdams 1988; Kroger 2007).

Biographical work is an orientation which examines how subjects use language and available categories to interpret and organize their life history (Rambo-Ronai and Cross 1998; Gubrium, Holstein, and Buckholdt 1994). The telling of one's story helps the social actor to "make sense of his or her life experiences" (Rambo-Ronai and Cross 1998 p 105), identity is fluid and changes with the variations of place, time, audience, and culture (Rambo-Ronai and Cross 1998). Biographical narratives provide a surface from which: identities and realities are crafted (Gubrium 1992), strategies in communicating one's experience are engaged, and where coping mechanisms are explored (Bochner, Ellis, and Tillmann-Healy 1997). Depending on the conversation flow and the reactions of the audience, subjects may narratively edit their stories (Gubrium and Holstein 2009). This practice of managing their stories affects the interpretation and construction of their identities for both the narrator and the audience.

Each interview was semi-structured to encourage organic story-telling. Questions regarding their family and occupation serve both as a point of rapport and context for their stories. Each participant will be asked to tell me their "gold star story", encouraging them to begin at the point they feel is most relevant. For some, that occurs at the commonly referred to "knock at the door" (Fenelon 2010). For others, it begins before that moment and sometimes it begins after they decided to apply for membership. While the hope is that the interview will flow in a conversational manner, I did have an

interview guide to ensure that key questions were not missed and to serve as a fail-safe for reserved participants who may not be as comfortable with the conversational format.

One on one interviews were recorded with a voice recorder. Participants are made aware of the recording device before the interview begins and had an opportunity to reject the recording of their interview or may designate certain parts to be off the record. Participants were informed in both the letter of consent and before the interviewing takes place that interviews and recordings were conducted with their confidence in mind.

Their names and identifying characteristics remain confidential unless they request otherwise. Given the mission of GSMO to perpetuate their children's legacy, some members wanted to include their names and their children's names. I attempt to honor that for those who expressed strong feelings toward it. Participants who choose to keep their identity public had the opportunity to request pseudonyms until the point of publication. Pseudonyms are used for parts of the interview where political and organizational topics are in focus. Therefore, a participant's real name may be used for one part of the interview and a pseudonym may be used for the other. For instance, when discussing the organization, a pseudonym may help protect the participant whereas when discussing a recollection of their child, using a real name may help them carry on their story. Challenges with naming may occur however this is spun. If everyone has a pseudonym, then members who recognize one person's story or child may then identify that person with any critiques they had regarding the organization or members. This also would hide the name, which again is antithetical to most of the mothers' operational motives. Using their public name for the entire piece may also flame tensions or prevent participants from speaking candidly about the organization.

Survey

Qualtrics was used for a small electronic survey where members participated anonymously and at their convenience. A flyer with a link to the survey was distributed at the national convention as well as an organizational post on Facebook and a link on the GSMO website. A printed copy was available on an unmanned table at the national convention where members could pick them up, however because there was not a secure way to anonymously return them, members were made aware that this method would be confidential rather than anonymous. A mailing address was available on the survey for those seeking to mail them in anonymously. Forty one participants participated in the electronic survey and ten submitted physical forms totaling fifty one.

The goal of the survey was to gather demographic data from the organization with the idea that more members may be interested in completing a quick survey than participating in a lengthy interview. Brief open-ended questions asked the participant to describe what they meant when they answered whether they are or are not a military family. They also asked participants what the organization means to them. This survey was an attempt at gathering more representative data and to gain more insight into race and income differences within the membership, as the organization is not allowed to share their data on these topics.

Participant Observation

In order to get at the social world of GSMO, I engaged in participant observation of the GSMO National Convention. Social worlds are indicative of the type of reality work that takes place (Gubrium 1992). Similar to W.I. Thomas's theorem that social life is made real only in its consequences, reality work suggests that people construct their

realities while crafting their identities (Gubrium 1992). For instance, as a mother begins taking on and internalizing the meaning she has for her GSMO membership, she molds her identity as a GSMO while simultaneously solidifying her reality as one. This new GSMO reality is comprised of a collection of meanings she has for her identity, her adherence to the group identity, and her understanding of the tacit rules and norms within the group. This is not to suggest worlds are cold, steel bars imprisoning occupants. Social worlds have warmth – they're pliable.

In his book *Living and Dying in Murray Manor*, Gubrium uses the concepts of social worlds to describe the meanings of places and "experiential borders" (1997: xx) among staff and clientele at Murray Manor. By "social worlds", Gubrium refers to "all that a person or group knows or experiences" (1997: xix), borrowing from the notion that not everybody experiences the same place, setting, events, in the same way or receives from those experiences the same meanings. Thus, worlds are confined by the borders of individual or group experience. In the GSMO world, members are brought together by similar affective and lived experience – the knock on the door, the dark cloud looming over the holidays, and grieving through service, yet still separated by positions such as on the executive board, state chapters, and war/conflict cohort.

By using the term "worlds", Gubrium describes the interpretations, meanings, and perceptions of a person or group of people, which speak representationally towards their own realities. Worlds give context to how a person or group of people make sense of their experiences. In the case of Gold Star Mothers, the organizations national conventions and events serve as worlds or contextual spaces where members organize their interpretations, meanings, perceptions, and purposes. In participant observation of

this contextual space, I immerse myself in this world as much as any non-gold star parent can.

Participation included volunteering to help set up nightly social hours, handing out badges, assisting in the transportation of mothers from the airport to the convention hall, shared meals, attending conference events including the welcome, memorial service, tours, and formal banquet on the last night. Each of these situations yield a different social context than the next. Nightly social hours were a time when gold star mothers gathered together at the end of the day, networked for upcoming elections, and casually mingled before exploring the conference city for the evening. GSMO events ranged in formality and some of the mothers have more distinguished roles than others. In some events, such as the swearing in of the new board, pomp and circumstance for the proceedings was to be expected. Pages and Banner Guard wore uniforms, white gloves and gold embroidered white hats. In other events, fanny packs and casual clothes were more appropriate.

Each convention was capped by the formal banquet on the last evening. GSMO members and their families dress up to honor the memories of lost loved ones and the sacrifices made, the outgoing president wraps up their final thoughts and fundraising endeavors, and guests are entertained with some form of patriotic performance. All participants were expected to take part in a bonding ritual at the end of the event wherein they clasp hands, standing in a circle, and proudly sing the words to Lee Greenwood's, "I'm Proud to be An American", filling the room with Durkheim's collective effervescence, before ending in hugs, goodbyes, and well wishes. In each of these events, mothers from across the nation, from wars and conflicts dating back to Vietnam, come

together to greet, hug, share stories, cry, plan organizational-political moves, and construct their social worlds within the organizationally embedded context.

The field site is emotionally expressive, meaning it is a place where emotions are not only accepted but expected. Through the events, emotions are expressed and organizers engage in emotion work as craft through the use of emotion codes and technology to evoke group emotion. As the emotion codes shift between events and even between moments of events, participants are expected to draw on their own emotional stamina and resilience. Situated in an urban landscape, the field site also brings into account interactions between in-group and out-group members. Special guests and the organizational participants reinforced patriotic narratives that co-construct meaning and attempt to demonstrate group authenticity.

Online Content Analysis

Cyber communities and social networks are important platforms for both identity expression and connecting with a community that may not be locally present or strong (Adler and Adler 2011). For gold star mothers, the organizational Facebook page provides a space of engagement regardless of geographical location, physical health and ability, and for *some* financial burden (aside from affording access to the internet and devices). Members of the public group share stories, names, posts, and comment on important dates. Because gathering consent on social media can be tricky and potentially disruptive toward the community, my online review is focused solely on organizational posts with the national executive board's prior approval. This approval also allowed for an analysis of the public website that contains archives of past and present presidential

speeches, affiliate organizations, historical information of the organization, and membership criteria.

Layered Account and Positionality

This manuscript is written as a layered account. A layered account is an ethnographic writing technique first developed by Carol Rambo Ronai (1992; 1995). This approach takes ethnographic work and decenters the authoritative understanding of the research, centering the overlapping narratives and consciousness of the researcher, participants, theory, statistics, and in some cases even fiction. These showcase a variety of voices, lived experiences, and reflections through the process of writing and interpreting the data. Gold star mothers do not live in a vacuum. They are legion and yet each vary considerably in experience and sense making. Layered accounts help to represent this nuance. They bring into focus the researcher's context and sense making and require each reader to consider their own understandings.

I am a white, cis-gender, woman in my late 20's and early 30's at the time of data collection. Through the course of this research, I also became a mother. Each of these identity categories shape both how I interpret the data and how participants view me and my accessibility. I am also married into a gold star family, coming from my own family of origin with military roots. My great-great grandmother would have been considered a gold star mother if she had been aware of the term at the time. In many of the more formal events, my experience growing up in conservative protestant churches granted me a comfort and ease in choosing attire and understanding some of the more formal and religious expectations. With my cultural capital accrued by hailing from the rural south, my higher education background helped me bridge some socio-economic gaps. As a

family member of a gold star mother, I benefitted from a little more trust than if I were a complete stranger to gold star. Many of the participants I spoke with vetted me independently and had experience with their media appearances and interviews resulting in what they believed to be gross misrepresentations. There is increasing awareness as one ages into the gold star of the risks associated with speaking to media and other out-group members. One of the factors I emphasized in these conversations was that I was a student, married into a gold star family, and wanting to fill in some of the massive research gaps on gold star families, seeking to share their stories and experiences with others.

When beginning the project, I was a young newlywed. My heart went out to those I spoke with but it wasn't until I had my own child that I gained a deeper understanding of the significance of motherhood. I interviewed two mothers while my preemie was in the NICU fighting for his life. Hearing the gold star mothers' stories about losing their sons while I was worried every day about possibly losing mine was felt on a level that I never would have been able to understand pre-motherhood. I made the choice not to interview others until my son was home. That experience shifted the way I interpreted and responded to their gold star stories.

When you, the audience, read through this, you will be forming your own interpretations. Maybe you feel for the mothers. Maybe you experience anger at politics both in-group and out-group. Maybe you wonder, who these mothers are? You may also connect some of the similarities and grief politics to the ways we talk about mass shootings, Covid, or other spectacles of grief. However you read and interpret it is going to shift your understanding of this work and the ways that it is significant to you. This

will be based on the information presented to you, filtered by my interpretation. Though I have tried to paint a holistic picture of gold star mothers, you only see the data selected, not the entire transcripts. While knowing someone for a week, or spending a 3 hour phone call discussing deeply personal matters is not enough to definitively *know* a person, it provides additional insight that the reader does not have. There are layers of presentation and interpretation at hand.

The participants accounts, my interpretations of them, and your interactions with both of the aforementioned forms an active, one might say living, project that evolves with each reader. It is an ongoing conversation that spans space, time, people, and moments. Rambo Ronai (1995) explains that layered accounts are designed to resemble a "duree" (Shutz 1970; Rambo Ronai 1995) or "stream of consciousness as experienced in everyday life" (Rambo Ronai, 1995: 396). Layered accounts are inspired by Bourdieu's (1989) perception of social research being an indicator of the researcher and that by taking a layered account approach, the researcher dispels the guise of complete objectivity.

CHAPTER THREE: CONSTRUCTING THE GOLD STAR AND ORGANIZATION HISTORY

Herbert Blumer (1969), outlined three principles for the symbolic interaction described above. 1) People treat objects and others based on the meaning they have for them. 2) The meaning one has for things is established by social interactions with others. 3) These meanings are managed by the person and are based on the person's interpretation in the moment. This process of meaning making for gold star mothers is demonstrated in the construction of gold star families and acknowledgment of gold star motherhood, its roots founded during the very inception of the organization's symbolic gold star.

Constructing The Gold Star

> There's a little Gold Star in the Service Flag,
> For a soldier who fought and fell,
> 'Twas blue as the sky when we kissed him good-bye,
> And he answered his last farewell. (Cronson and Freeman 1918)

On May 3, 1918, Caroline Seaman Read wrote a letter to then President Woodrow Wilson (Fenelon 2010). Having lost a son in combat during the first World War, Read wrote that she understood the casualties of war and the significance of that loss. Rather than, "taking up the temptation to hide our pain behind a mourning that would hold off intrusion…" (Fenelon 2010: 30; Read 1918: 27), Read stated that she wished to celebrate the bravery and sacrifice of her son and, "regard his death as a happy promotion to higher service" (Fenelon 2010: 10; Read 1918: 27). She urged President Wilson to formally assign a badge, a tangible symbol that mothers of fallen soldiers could wear that would symbolize honor rather than sadness. Read proposed the emblem of a golden star.

Records indicate that President Wilson had been concerned about the long-term effects of war casualties on the morale of the country (Fenelon 2010, p 30). Having seen the devastation in the southern states post-Civil War, Wilson feared that mourning families and friends would discourage the will to fight. Mrs. Read's timely letter seemed to indicate an alternative to taking up the black veils. Four days after receiving Read's letter, President Wilson took to the Union Progress newspaper based out of South Carolina (Fenelon 2010; Wilson, 1966[1918]). In his editorial piece, President Wilson voiced his support of the usage of a gold star to mark the lives of fallen soldiers, to signify, "Earth's most precious treasure… fame and immortality," and to establish an additional symbol which paralleled the traditional blue stars of service men. President Wilson then forwarded Mrs. Read's original letter to renowned suffragette, Dr. Anna Shaw, who became in charge of designing the gold star armband, worn to denote a military parent's loss. In doing so, Mrs. Read and President Wilson altered the narrative of war casualties, shaping new meaning making discourses for the families of fallen soldiers and constructing a gold star family identity that persists in a national and political capacity today.

A Brief History of the Organization

Around the same time as the development of the gold star, another military mother, Mrs. Grace Darling Whitaker Seibold was engaging in frequent correspondence with her son, Lieutenant George Vaughn Seibold (Fenelon 2010). Lt. Seibold was training as an aviator during WW1. Two months to the date that Mrs. Read penned her letter, Lt. Seibold was assigned to the U.S. 148th pursuit squadron in France, which was subsequently placed under British command. On August 24, 1918, Seibold sent his last

letter home. Shot down from the sky two days later, it took months before the Seibold family would hear about the fate of their son.

On October 11th, Lt. Seibold's wife received a box of her husband's belongings without any word or explanation (Fenelon 2010). Mr. Seibold Sr. promptly contacted the U.S. War Department but they could not confirm whether his son was alive, injured, or missing. Unable to find answers to her son's whereabouts, Lt. Seibold's mother, Grace, began volunteering at local military hospitals, "sustaining hope that George might have been badly injured and returned to the United States without identification. As had so many others." (p 51). What she found were veterans in need of care and other mothers turning loss and unknowing into service.

After World War I, many organizations accepted gold star mothers into the ranks of their membership (Fenelon 2010). These included The American Legion, the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), and the World War I Registrar, and the American War Mothers (AWM) – a group established for mothers of military service members, both living and recently lost. The AWM initially granted gold star mothers automatic life-time membership. However, in 1927, AWM voted to discontinue this practice. Feeling shunned, many gold star mothers across the nation, including Mrs. Seibold, withdrew their memberships from AWM.

Realizing a need for a national gold star organization, Mrs. Seibold solidified a group of 35 gold star mothers, and in 1928 they held the first national meeting of the Gold Star Mothers Organization (Fenelon 2010). Together, they created a constitution, "Whereas, we, the mothers of heroes who made the supreme sacrifice in the cause of humanity while in the service of the United States or who died as a result of such service,

unite to establish a permanent organization for loyal and patriotic purposes." (p 52, preamble). On January 5th, 1929, the GSMO became GSMO incorporated under Washington D.C. law.

In 1984, Congress passed the organizations federal charter as an incorporation. It lists as part of its articles of incorporation the following list of purposes.

> *Keep alive and develop the spirit that promoted world services.
> *Maintain the ties of fellowship born of that service, and to assist and further all patriotic work.
> *Inculcate a sense of individual obligation to the community, State, and Nation.
> *Assist veterans of World War I, World War II, the Korean Conflict, Vietnam, and other strategic areas and their dependents in the presentation of claims to the Veterans' Administration, and to aid in any way in their power the men and women who served and died or were wounded or incapacitated during hostilities.
> *Perpetuate the memory of those whose lives were sacrificed in our wars.
> *Maintain true allegiance to the United States of America.
> *Inculcate lessons of patriotism and love of country in the communities in which we live.
> *Inspire respect for the Stars and Stripes in the youth of America.
> *Extend needful assistance to all Gold Star Mothers and, when possible, to their descendants.
> *To promote peace and good will for the United States and all other Nations. (AGSM 2021; Public Law 98-314, 1984)

Often distinguished by war or conflict category, World War mothers – those who lost children serving in World War I or World War II chartered ships and made pilgrimages to Europe, where many of their sons had fallen, and where some were still buried. Few academic works address GSMO. One of these is a historical critique on the segregation of mothers during these voyages. Occurring during the Jim Crow era, white mothers and mothers of color were separated by decks throughout the trip. When conducting interviews for this project, one participant – a black gold star mother – described racial tensions during their first convention in the late 1990's when she

overheard white gold star mothers around her whispering about her and whether she belonged there. “When I got involved, it was all these older moms. All Vietnam or Korean, maybe one or two World War II moms. The attitudes of those moms – they were still full of – you know the way their children were treated – so they still had animosity. Some had hatred. And also, you know these women, had very few blacks. So they still had a lot of racist personalities.” Another participant – a latinx gold star mother – expressed the importance to her to find other gold star mothers who shared similar ethnicity because she felt that latinx express emotions differently. She claimed that she felt white mothers viewed her outbursts and emotional expression as over the top.

In 2019, the GSMO voted in its first black national president. In her keynote address the incoming national president spoke to the white racial predominance in its membership juxtaposed with the demographic information of fallen service members. While white, male, lower ranked service members under the age of thirty still make up the vast majority of military casualties, the representation of moms of color should be higher than it currently was. It became one of this President’s initiatives to address GSMO’s racial disparity and hopefully welcome in more gold star moms of color to the organization. To be clear, no gold star mother that I have spoken to would ever wish the gold star upon another. When organizational membership is mentioned, they are regarding those who are already gold star mothers but who may or may not have chosen to join the GSMO organization.

Since its formal inception, GSMO has remained active in social and political spheres. As the Gold Star organization grew, so too did the potential for inventing and processing a new identity for the motherhood in question. An elected board member

serves on the larger Veteran's Association board assisting in the decision making process that effects all of those returning from active duty and their families. GSMO members are invited to meet the President of the United States on an annual or near annual basis. The board members maintain an active relationship with top military leaders, leaders in the Pentagon, and legislative representatives. A Gold Star Mother serves as a liaison in the Pentagon. They work closely with the Library of Congress to record veterans' history and the lived experiences of gold star families. Sharing the story and legacy of their loved ones is crucial to them because it is a way to keep their children socially alive.

Several representatives hold interns on their staff designated for gold star family members. GSMO has introduced bills into congress including National Gold Star Families Week and Gold Star Mother's Sunday. Individual mothers rename highways, build monuments, construct parks, host summer camps, and start foundations that continue their child's legacy. It was through the initiative of Vietnam era Gold Star Mothers serving in GSMO that the Vietnam Veterans War Wall was constructed in DC. One of those mothers laid the cornerstone. GSMO hosts Gold Star Mother's Sunday in September every year where they invite military leaders to attend public wreath laying ceremonies at the Vietnam Wall and a memorial ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery.

Archie Dunn and the Prevalence of Service Member Loss

November 1st, 1944, red-haired Archie Dunn covered for an ill shipmate onboard the U.S. Navy Destroyer, the U.S.S. Anderson. Originally scheduled to work elsewhere on the ship that day, 24 year old Dunn manned a port side gun as the boat patrolled the Cabalian Bay in Southern Leyte, Philippines. Around 18:12 (6:12 pm) Japanese planes

carried out a kamikaze mission. A Nakajima K-43, "Oscar" single-engine fighter plane crashed into the port side, killing 16 crewmen, including Dunn (Naval History and Heritage Command 2019).

Dunn left behind a wife and a young son who bore his name. His mother, Ida Jane Dunn, became a gold star mother. It is at her table, my great-great-grandmother's, that I type this account. Six generations of my family have eaten from the table that now sits in my kitchen, including Archie. I was a very young child the first time I heard about my great-uncle. My grandmother described him to me while walking among the town's war memorials. I did not understand war, loss, and death. A child, I only wanted to sit on the large chains which were connected to concrete markers; those markers symbolized the lives lost. My grandmother had been fourteen when her beloved uncle died. She brought me to the park to honor and remember him, so that his story would not die. Now seventy-seven years later, his legacy still continues through family stories.

According to the Defense Casualty Analysis System (DCAS), researched by the Defense Manpower Data Center (DMDC), used by the United States Department of Defense, Archie was one of 495,399 casualties during World War II (DMDC 2017; DeBruyne 2017). Over one million Americans have given, sacrificed, and lost their lives for this country (DeBruyne 2017). According to the 2015 Census Bureau, the United States is made up of roughly 321 million people. If we were to bend the rules of time and space to conceptualize the immensity, it would take losing 1 in every 300 Americans to symbolize the total of US military casualties since the country's creation. Their sacrifice is valorized in patriotic narratives, commodified on national holidays, forgotten by the general public the bulk of the year – setting aside the patriotic holidays like July 4th,

Veterans Day, Memorial Day, Patriot Day, and Pearl Harbor or D-Day. Yet, where these heroes' stories end, new ones for the loved ones they left behind begin. Family members are left to answer that knock on the door, to construct legacies, and renegotiate their meanings. Mothers, fathers, siblings, spouses, children, and more are left holding severed attachments and shattered expectations.

These are the stories often overlooked in dominant war narratives – with the exceptions of families like Khizr and Ghazala Kahn's, who were brought onto the Democratic National Convention stage during the 2016 presidential election to talk about the loss of their son, Humayun, and encourage voters to cast for Hillary Clinton (Bruton 2016). When not used as political pawns, gold star families, are the unseen, forgotten, and unspoken within mainstream American culture and scholarship.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE KNOCK ON THE DOOR

Vilomah – Sanskrit for "against the natural order", often used to describe bereaved parents. Burying one's child goes against the natural order of life, or what we like to think of it as. The parental identity is shaken. The family may become fractured. A memory exists where a full person should. It is in the first moments of the loss that normalcy is forever changed. The parent grieves the past, the present, and the future that could have been.

In this chapter, I discuss the experiences of mothers who experienced vilomah by becoming a gold star mom. I look at what is called the "knock on the door". It is the moment a family officially learns of their loved one's death. From this moment, the story of parenthood, identity, and legacy shift. In the minutes, hours, and days to come, the parents make the last decisions they can for the physical child. After the knock, mothers I spoke with transitioned from mothering the child to mothering the legacy and purpose of the child's life. This is meaning making. Creating legacy is sense making. And, it is parenting.

When asked where their gold star stories began, participants began in two places. One was at the birth of their child. The second and by far the most common, was on the day they were told their child had died. It is at these knock on the door stories that these mothers begin their gold star journey. Drawing from interview data, I show how the knock occurred for some mothers, the procedures and decisions following the knock including "picking up" their child, and burial. Participants describe what it felt like to hear the news, how much control they had in decision making for their children, and how they now make sense of arguably one of the most traumatic moments of their lives. As

described later, the military still maintains control of the body and of the information they choose to disclose to the family. Part of the gold star mother's experience is to take back possession of the child from the military and to learn what she can beyond the limited information she initially received. Here, she receives back the physical body and transitions into nurturing the legacy. I end this chapter with a new normal as told by gold star mothers. The new normal explores how mothers make sense of and respond to living without their child. For some, family traditions are re-constructed, new patterns begin, and the role of mothering takes on a new meaning of legacy work.

The Knock

For my in-laws, the knock came on Christmas morning. Their middle child, Daniel – a marine – was staying on base across the country and had called home the night before. He wanted to make sure his Christmas gifts had made it to them. Gathered around the tree opening presents the next morning, my mother-in-law looked up and saw the vehicle. At first, she says she felt excited, assuming it was Daniel there to surprise them. Instead, it was the knock. It is the emotional scene we've watched played out in the movies. Two men in military uniforms exit a black car, parked on the side of the road. They walk up to the small quintessential American house. The mother sees them and opens the door. As they approach the steps, the mother in the movies drops to her knees, sobbing. For real Gold Star Mothers, this is commonly referred to as, "The Knock on the Door". It is the moment every mother hopes never comes. It is the most dreadful and painful visit.

The knock on the door is devastating. It confirms to the mother that their child has died. It fractures the family that was. It's metaphorical tap reverberates for decades. The

process varies in every circumstance but the immediate outcome is the same. Loss. Death. Grief.

Each branch of the military has their own policy regarding notifying next of kin. These processes have evolved over time from colder and distant notifications to immediate ones with casualty assistance officers and resources available for next of kin and secondary next of kin (Bartone and Ender 1994). In their research on Army notification policy, Bartone and Ender found that the manner in which a family is notified of their loved ones passing can impact their views on the loss. Those who are notified in a way that feels cold or confusing may have more resentment or negative feelings towards the organization. Those who are notified in a kinder, more supportive way are more likely to have more positive affiliations with the organization. In the UK, Rolls and Harper (2015) found that bereaved military families who receive practical support were more likely to find meaning in the death and to find adaptive coping mechanisms. As we see in this research, each family had their own experience with the knock on the door and this laid the foundation for their gold star experiences going forward.

Individual Stories of the Knock

When asked where their gold star stories began, most interview participants began with "the knock". This was the moment that shifted their identities and roles as mothers. This is the moment they would gain a new label. From here, they were required to consider burial arrangements, new holiday plans, how to answer the question of how many children they have, and to restructure what motherhood meant to them. The following are experiences as told by participants. Some of what you read may be emotionally difficult. Appreciation goes out to all participants who shared their stories.

In the following account, we follow gold star mother, Mona, as she learned about her son's death.

Mona's story:

> Cherone was a truly a loving child. Friendly, outgoing, and very well-liked by his peers. When he got to high school, as an African American in the 9th grade, he's a minority. But, he was selected as Mr. Freshman. That says a lot about his personality. Very happy go lucky self. I'll never forget trying to get his colors right at age 2 and 3. It took until he was four. And he continued to struggle in school. He suffered with asthma. He joined a co-op program his senior year in high school where he took some courses in school and then he would leave school and do hotel training. It was something he enjoyed doing. He had a job working at the Holiday Inn as a shuttle driver once getting his license.

Cherone eventually joined the Navy and was on his first mission when his mother received the knock. As you will see, the knock on the door takes its form in different ways.

> I was in school that morning and sometimes I turn the TV on and look at the news. I did not that morning. I got there before anyone else and was in the office planning my day. I had a private (phone) line that issues for my family. So that private line rang and it was my sister asking me, what ship was Cherone on? I said, "The Cole". She said, they're in the news. There has been an attack on the Cole. I said, "Okay bye" and hung up the phone. I ran across the hall to the media center and turned on the television. There I saw the ship and the 44 foot hole and read where it said "four dead". In my heart of hearts, I thought, I hope Cherone is not one of those four. I went back to my office sat there a while. After the secretaries came in, my (other) son calls me. He saw the news. I called my boss and explained to her what happened. So I left.
>
> I went home, I'm there by myself and turned on the news. That's all that I'm hearing. I'm calling this number that they put at the bottom of the tv. They said, "Ma'am you need to go to the Hall [on the nearby Navy base that Cherone and others were stationed out of] and there will be members there with updates on the base." I called another son and he's trying to get out of class and meet with me to go there. We met on base and I was on the phone with my husband. I transferred all calls from other numbers to my cell phone. You hear about knock at the door but I didn't know the procedure. We were asking as family members of that group, "How are we going to find out if we are here?" They told us to sign in and

> take name tags. They would find us if they needed us. My other son, was with me when I got the news. I was there from 12:30 to about 4:30 hoping and praying my son was not one of the dead. Everybody there was hoping and praying.
>
> I was on my way out when someone said, "Can you come with us? Can you come go with me?" They had a casualty officer and a counselor in the room. Some (other families) were told their loved ones were missing. They identified those they couldn't find as missing, because the attack threw some in the water and some body parts were mangled in the ship. Cherone was one of the four and we were fortunate to get remains back in tact as much as possible. His injuries were blunt force. We were able to see remains but his head was wrapped in gauze. I was blessed to see that because other families were not."

While the military likes to notify families before media, our current technology makes that difficult. As I edit this section, a bombing has occurred at a Kabul airport killing 13 U.S. Marines and Navy members. The death count has increased from a vague several, to 4, to 13 in a matter of hours. I see this and I think of the story above. What are the parents and families of the service members stationed at the airport going through? How long did they have to pray before they received word? Mona's account also highlights the confusion and uncertainty of the notification process. Parents who see news of an incident are in this limbo of life and grief. They do not know whether their child is alive but do know that some have died or are missing. In the following account, we hear from a gold star mother, Dianne, who also experienced a version of this parental limbo.

> Once I found out, it was on the news. I had gone to a ballgame for my grandson that afternoon. I initially told him no, but all day at work I thought I needed to go to that ballgame. It felt like lightning through my body. I don't know if a mother knows but it was a weird week for me. So I said I'm going to go surprise him at the ballgame (45 mins away). So I get there and my daughter comes to the car and says, "Mom, there's been some marines come. Do not go home and listen to the news. Don't do any of that. Stay away from the tv until we hear that Travis is fine." So, I was just bouncing on the bleachers and we were hearing about it through

> chitter chatter through the stands. After the game, I went home and when I got home my landlord was outside talking to a gentleman. I get out of my car. I start talking to two neighbors and all of a sudden 3 SUVs pull into the carport and I just knew. I started screaming. Thank God my neighbors were there because I literally went down to the ground. Once I found out, because they had to notify me first, it was like a firecracker. It was all over the news.

There are a few important components that Dianne's account addresses. She isn't the only gold star mom to suggest that the mother child bond stretches across geographic space in an almost supernatural wavelength warning some mothers that their child is at risk or has passed. There is this notion that mothers should inherently know and experiences from gold star mothers draw on that notion to help them make sense of the event and moments leading toward it. Similar to Mona, Dianne and her surviving daughter are made aware that a tragic event has occurred but they are left waiting to find out if Travis was injured or killed during it. In both experiences, the mothers were left cobbling together any useful information they could. After the notification, Dianne describes how the news immediately reported that her son was one of the ones killed. Local and national news stations are quick to report. The deaths become spectacle on television screens and radio stations, as I discuss further in a later chapter. It can become a sensory overload. On top of their grief, families are inundated with calls from loved ones, acquaintances, reporters seeking interviews, and more.

Hearing of her son's passing before the official notification, another mother – Dana – recalled an important moment that helped her steel herself for the inevitable.

> My daughter called originally. She had heard. I left work and drove home. I turned the corner. I saw the black car and the government license plate and I knew. I parked behind another car. I asked myself, do I go in and listen to them tell me what I already know or do I sit out here and pretend it didn't happen? Then I thought, my family is in there. My family needs me. So, I walked in with two marine officers in my house. – Dana

Tempted by maintaining normalcy for a few minutes longer, Dana chooses to go inside and be there for her surviving family even if it meant receiving the official notification that her son had died. While these knock on the door stories mark a transitional moment for mothers and parents in terms of losing their child and taking on new parental roles, it also serves as a fracture of the family. Going forward, parents are faced with the delicate matter that is nurturing a legacy while still being present for their surviving family and parenting living children, along with supporting spouses and other family members. For most, the moment is met with shock and hope that the information is false.

> The news is a shock to the system. I told you the Army guy came to my work. --- I walked in and he goes, "are you _____". And I thought, uh oh, I'm in trouble, because nobody uses my full name. I don't remember if he said it was an accident or the "sorry, to inform you."
> And I asked if anyone else was involved and there wasn't.
> I've been told and I go home. The phone calls start. I'm numb. I think this is not real. I need real evidence that this is real. – Gina

The need for confirmation is not surprising. As we see with the excerpt below, Gina is not the only one to demand additional confirmation. This is a monumental moment for the mother's identity, expectations, ways of interacting with others, and a shift in sense making.

In cases where the child was married, the parents may find out after the child's spouse or even from the child's spouse.

> I found out in an usual way how my son died. My husband and I were at Toys "R" Us with my grandson for his birthday. My cell phone rang and I saw it was from my son's wife. I told her what we were doing. She goes, "Is Jack there?" I said yes and handed him the phone. I thought maybe she wanted to talk to him about my birthday, but she told him right then and there that Brent had been killed. He didn't tell me. The military told her not to call, that they would get in touch with us. He fell back against the

> shelving. He said, "I can't talk now" and hung up. He rushed the grandson and I thought that was strange. We take the grandson back and I'm talking and he says, "We need to go. I have stuff to do." So, I get my coat on and we are getting ready to go and my phone rings. It's my daughter. The daughter in law had called her too. I answered and she's crying hysterically and says his name. I drop to my knees with my phone. I think I screamed but I don't remember. She says, "Mom, you have to go home because the soldiers are already there and they have to notify you." I knew before they came to the door but it was still surreal. When they stand there in front of you and say, "I regret to inform you"… they couldn't even look at me because they knew him from school. My daughter gave them a hard time, asking how they knew it was them and if they did a DNA test? How were they certain? I never thought you could actually feel pain in your heart but at that moment I did. – Lisa

Work, a baseball game, toy shopping, opening Christmas presents, families lives are upended by a single proverbial or real knock. The United States Military tries to be the first to notify families. Technology and changing policy has expedited the process (Bartone and Ender 1994) but also made it challenging for the casualty officers to beat the news cycle. As I describe in a later chapter, there is a fascination in our country with service member loss. Their deaths become spectacle, broadcasted for revenue and served as water cooler fodder. Politics use loss and the parents' grief to garner support for troops and to evoke emotional connection with the audience. For families experiencing the knock, the shock blocks the material out – temporarily.

Each branch has its own resources for gold star families. Some mothers describe wonderful officers who are with the parent during every step of the process. Others were left feeling through the dark, trying to navigate a new world that they never wanted to be a part of. During Mona's knock, the Navy lacked consistent casualty assistance officers. Mona explained that because of the nature of the explosion, some family members of the Cole received additional pieces of their children after they had already buried the initial ones. Nearly a year after the attack, Mona received a piece of the ship in the mail from

the Navy. “Why would I want this? It’s like if someone’s child was killed in a car crash and you mail them the steering wheel.” How the death is organizationally handled matters (Bartone and Ender 1994). It impacts the sensemaking of the families and their perceptions of the military organization. That organizational affiliation then factors into the post death and gold star stories they tell. In this section, I have shared several knock on the door accounts but they are all from those whose child died through being killed in action or service related accident. As I discuss later in chapter seven, one of the growing phenomenon the military faces is veteran and service member suicide. Their knock stories are just as significant and disruptive of their normalcy. They may add an additional layer of confusion or anomie to the situation. For one participant whose son served multiple tours and later died by suicide, leaving behind parents, a spouse, and children, the reasons “why” were left blank. Manner of death shapes the stories mothers tell, the spectacle post knock, how mothers reconstruct their identities, and what path their child’s legacy may take.

The knock is literal and symbolic, catapulting the mother on a sense making journey. Compound that with the limited information families may be given or with parents who did not realize their child was at risk. Those who die while in training, state side, accident, who were scheduled for leave but traded places, or from suicide add an additional layer to the inconceivable nature of vilhoma and of loss of a child. The knock itself does not cause the grief, identity reformation, fragmentation of what was. However, in gold star stories and I would suspect in moments of unexpected grief whether military involved or not, the knock serves as a memory pinpoint of the moment their world changed.

After the Knock.

Participants described the days and months after the knock as a blur. Decisions had to be made. Protocol had to be followed. Obtaining information about death details and when the body would be home was a matter of contention for some. Within the first few hours, media was alerted and the strangers private grief became public. If the knock on the door denotes the moment of disruption, identity and role transition, and fracture, then the following days, months, and early years become the first steps on their gold star journey.

> For the first three months, I checked out. I didn't care if I ate, I didn't care if I slept, I didn't care if I drank. Even after that being in a restaurant hearing people laugh and stuff, I remember thinking, "Don't they know my son has died? How can they be laughing?" I remember the first time I laughed after that, I felt horrible. How could I be happy? I felt guilty. For the longest time I just told myself he was away. He's just away. – Tracy

For Tracy, the months after the knock were filled with ambiguous grief. Her son was psychologically present in memory, denial, and sense, but he was physically absent. Unlike the ambiguous presence (Faber et al. 2008) she may have felt during the deployment, there was no joyous reunion to look forward to. Grappling with absence [death] during a time when he had previously been absent [deployed] required its own restructuring. Tracy, like other gold star mothers, was left coming to terms with the knowledge that her son was no longer alive, that she was a mother but that this meaning was changing. The feelings of happiness or other's laughter for even a few seconds was inundated with guilt and disbelief. How could she, a mother, ever feel happy after losing her son? And how could others laugh mere months after his loss? For Tracy, her son was front and center of emotions and emotional expectation.

> My ex-husband and I were never asked anything about Brent's funeral. We never had any input into that. We drove out the next day. They put in the paper, when his body would be coming back in the paper. Then they contacted the wife and said he could be delayed up to 48 hours. One of Brent's friends was there who works in the pentagon. I asked the number for the White House and he gave it to me. I called and they answered. I was crying hysterically and telling them the body was going to be delayed and we couldn't make arrangements. They connected me to the Secretary of the Army. I said if I didn't hear back from him within an hour I was going to hold a press conference. They got back to me then. – Barbara

Barbara's son was killed in a time before family could meet their children's bodies at Dover. Left with the uncertainty of his arrival coupled with the already stressful process of planning a funeral after a child's sudden death, Barbara's experience displays some of the limbo from the lack of information given to gold star families. The bureaucratic nature of the military delays the dissemination of crucial information for some (Bartone and Ender 1994).

> The next day, the head of our rescue unit shows up to my door. Hands me a bottle of water because he knows I'm not eating or drinking. He says, "Come with me." Gives me a hug. Tells me he's sorry. Gets me in the vehicle and says,
> "What are you going to do?"
> "I was thinking about church."
> "That's not big enough."
> "It's not?"
> "No. Not only has this affected you and your family, but this has affected the whole community." He says.
> "Oh."
> He says, "I'm going to help you." He gets everything squared away. We had the funeral in the high school that seats over 500 people. There were still people outside. We had a funeral broadcast outside and it still was not enough room. – Gina

In this interaction, the day after Gina learns of her son's death, she is told that his life and loss affected an entire community and that she needed to consider that while planning the funeral arrangements. Gold star parents, may find themselves in a push and

pull with autonomy and control. In those early days, the military still maintains control of the body. When arranging for funerals and burials, the community and media expectations are present, influencing the organizing efforts and experience of the funeral itself for family members. Particularly for those killed in action or accident, narratives of "fallen soldier" or service member permeate the immediate atmosphere.

As if processing the loss and planning the arrangements weren't enough, military funerals often garner a large crowd. They fill auditoriums and consume small towns. Participants described an outpouring of attention and connection throughout the world. Some had letters written, emails, phone calls, social media posts, and gifts sent from people who heard of their child's death. Gold star mothers are sent paintings, flags, engraved pocket knives, knickknacks, pendants with religious quotes, newspaper clippings, postcards and more. People who knew the deceased or served in the unit previously reach out. Veterans of the same branch and other gold star families may make contact. For a couple of participants, unknown gold star mothers attended the funeral and left pamphlets at the end of the visitation line. Protests are also a common threat. Groups like the Westboro Baptist attempt to protest and disrupt military funerals (Grindle 2009). Congress approved the Respect for America's Fallen Heroes Act in 2006 preventing civil disruption of federal funerals at nationally controlled cemeteries – like Arlington -- for the hour leading to the funeral through the 60 minutes directly following the funeral (Respect for America's Fallen Heroes Act 2006). Westboro Baptist refutes the constitutionality of the act and claims it impedes on their first amendment rights (Grindle 2009; Suesz 2012). Alternative groups such as the Patriot Guard – a motorcycle group with a mission of shielding gold star families from unwanted funeral disruptions – attend

to counteract. It should be noted that mothers of those killed in action, killed in training, or died by accident organically described the large crowds in interviews. Participants who were mothers of veteran or service member suicide did not choose to go into this part. These media spins, community expectations, existing national and political narratives, invade the parent's familial sphere at a time when they are arguably most vulnerable and are in the process of understanding, coping, and reconstructing a world without their child in it.

Picking up their child.

One of the first steps of the gold star journey involves the transfer of the child's remains from the military to the family's care and control. This is a moment of regaining control of the physical body and expanding the parental role to care for the physical, psychological, and social well-being of their child. The parent determines where the body will be taken, how it will be processed (buried, cremated, etc), what wishes they choose to honor from the child, and what public story they want to share.

It threw me off when participants spoke of "picking up" their children for the final time. Initially, I was not sure if they were referring to previous returns or thinking back to the many times they must have picked their children up from sports, school, friends, and other events. I quickly realized that the phrase was used for the final homecoming too. The phrase sounded light, normal, yet the experience carried an insurmountable weight.

> The [son's]wife decided not to go to meet the son at Dover. One of Brent's friends, a state policeman, provided a police escort from the funeral home to the airport and back again. I never saw them bring him off the plane. I didn't see him until we got him home. Back in 2005, you weren't allowed to meet them at Dover and they didn't assign a casualty officer to the parents. – Barbara

Parents of young service members transition from caregiver and authority over their child's life to suddenly waiting to hear from a disembodied entity what, where, and when their child will be. Even after the death, the military is largely still in control over the process for those who died during active duty (Sledge 2005). The military controls how the body returns to American soil if lost overseas. They decide when the body is released and the information the parents are privy to both in terms of circumstances surrounding the death and in regard to transportation and release details. In some cases, it was not until after the body had arrived home that family members discovered the condition of their children. As we hear with Ruth's story later, she and her husband learned how their son died only when the husband investigated their son's body at the funeral. In another story also covered later in the manuscript, we learn how one father had to use their security clearance to learn more about the circumstances surrounding his son's death. And for another mother, an official investigation had to be conducted before she learned the cause of her son's death. Other mother's, they rely on accounts from their child's fellow service members. Some never find out all the answers they seek regarding their loved one's deaths.

Aside from death circumstances, the military also controls who can be present at pickup. Parents may be restricted from capturing images at Dover. One mother, left in an organizing limbo, reported having to call around to multiple sections of the military to find out where her son's body was and when they would receive him. Once the body has transferred, the family takes back over control of the physical body. From there, they can make arrangements on escort, funeral, burial, headstone, etc. The exception being those

buried at Arlington National Cemetery where families must adhere to the protocols and restricted options.

> We got to see Greg the day after we picked him up at the airport. We arranged a police escort to bring him back home. They sent six cars! Greg had gotten in trouble some when he was younger. Nothing serious but you know, trouble. His friend said, "You know, Greg would really like this – the police in front of him not behind him." When we turned the corner with his hearse, there was a group of guys from his high school blowing bubbles (like Greg did during their graduation). - Polly

Polly was able to find a brief moment of comfort in her believe that Greg would have enjoyed seeing the turnout of police bringing him home in a dignified way rather than one where he was in trouble with the law. Here, Polly and her family demonstrate caring for the physical body as well as the psychological presence of Greg through taking into account what he would have thought about the scene.

I end the call with a separate participant whose son was killed just nine months prior. A minute later, my phone vibrates. It is a message with images of her family, Christmas photos from the last time she saw him. My phone buzzes again. This time it's a video from her. I open it to see her footage of her son's return home. She was not only able to attend her son's welcome at Dover Air Force Base but to obtain video footage of it. Dover is the landing location for those killed overseas. Both the ability for family to attend and the ability to take images had been banned at the start of the conflict.

I watch as the servicemen carry the metal box off the plane. This is her son. This is the formerly quiet kid, the athletic kid, the son who was always the first to wish his mother a happy mother's day. Families of service members often look forward to their loved one's return with excitement and anticipation. Homecomings are filled with hugs, smiles, and some tears. There are posters, balloons, teddy bears, and gratitude. For gold

star mothers, this joyous scene becomes a dream. At Dover, those things do not exist. This homecoming is dark. The sky is grey. The mood is somber. You hear the clicking of the steps. No laughter. No warm hugs. Yet, there is gratitude that the son is home… and pain. Gold star parents find themselves reeling in loss while trying to regain footing and control. Expectations of the community, media coverage, political narratives, their own perceptions of role and duty all converge at this moment of transformation into their gold star identity – encompassing a reexamination of their identity, parental roles, family dynamics, and later group affiliations. From these early days, gold star parents are already engaged in legacy work, cultivating a life, image, and purpose for their deceased child. In some ways, the funeral and burial mark that process as they unveil the story of who the loved one was, while putting the body to rest. The parent is left with the memory and legacy work.

Funeral and Burial

Large flags are held in an arch above us. We, the gold star guests and fathers, load onto the charter bus. We tour military barracks, a war museum, and a base. It is a hot June afternoon. The sun is beaming down and I regret not bringing sunscreen with me. We crowd into a unairconditioned office. A small tv is wheeled forward and video plays. We watch as mist floats above a green field with a gravel lane. There's silence as the trumpet plays. Out of the mist emerges a set of horses, carrying a black wagon loaded with a military coffin. These are Caisson horses. Their job is to transport the casket to the burial site. Not every military funeral has these. I watch the dads watch the funeral entrance. I imagine they are remembering their own children's funerals – whether they had a Caisson or not. We then tour the facility. We see the saddles. We meet the horse

keepers. We even feed the horses. There's a quietness as we look around and wander in and out of barns and stables.

Funeral customs and death rites vary by culture, religion, ethnicity, and time period, resources, familial relationships, among others (Holloway 2013; Ramshaw 2010; Scheyer 2021). Some are personal, others formal. Some follow strict rituals and social order. Others tend to be more relaxed. Where they occur, who presides them, whether or not there is music, and what emotional displays are expected depend on the beliefs, practices, and position in time. One consistent theme either during the funeral or in events surrounding it – such as a visitation or reception – is the practice of storytelling (Anderson and Foley 1998; Ramshaw 2010). Even in times of controversial deaths such as suicide, storytelling is an important and consistent part of the grieving process (Ramshaw 2010). Slideshows of photographs, the loved one's favorite song played over a speaker, and their colorful hats serve as symbols of the person's humor, love, taste, and sensibility. These are used as techniques to honor and remember.

Funerals for anyone are exhausting, can be lonely, and they are uncomfortable. They can last for days with long visitation lines, endless small talk, inappropriate comments, and a constant visual reminder that even though one's loved one is mere feet from them, they are no longer present in the conscious sense. There are no more phone calls, emails, or surprise gifts. Families often find comfort in personalizing the funeral and connecting to the deceased in some way during it (Holloway et al. 2013). Some families choose to take a picture of the deceased as a last photo. For gold star families, they have the need of a good funeral – that is one that allows for meaning seeking and a higher purpose. Due to the media attention and public fascination with service member

loss, spectacle often becomes interposed within the funeral, possibly adding to the meaning being created.

> And there was one person, a fellow in a uniform, came and asked if he could take a picture of my son in a casket and I said, "Sure." I still to this day don't know who he was but I would kind of like the picture. – Andrea

At the funeral for Andrea's son, a complete stranger captured a casket picture for an unknown reason. Inundated with the crowd, the grief, and the process of the day, Andrea did not have the time or space to ask why the picture was needed. During funerals, mothers described a blur of people and information. People they had never met would make requests and ask questions about the family. The families were juggling their personal grief, public spectacle, and the politics associated with both. Gold star mothers are not celebrity families. They often do not have official security or bouncers. Requests and responses to people are up to the individual families processing their new reality.

As I discuss in later chapters, the meaning of presence is eventually restructured by families who substitute the physical presence of their child with symbols and legacy (Holloway et al 2013). Symbols in this case are tokens connecting the bereaved to the deceased. It could be as stuffed animal, a toothbrush, a last letter. Likewise, the images of the deceased may stand in for the living presence in symbolic ways. A picture of the child makes it to Yellowstone or the Eiffel Tower and it is storied as if the child themselves made it there. There is not a disillusionment that the child is physically there. It is a negotiation of storytelling where the parent takes on the social agency of the child and projects physical world meanings onto memory. This is legacy making. To gold star mothers, it is a way of connecting with their child's memory/soul/spirit and sharing their child's story with others. In their research on funerals, Holloway (et al. 2013) found a

belief in afterlife and presence in families regardless of spiritual and religious beliefs. The bereaved actively work to maintain connections with their lost loved ones (Hallam et al. 1999; Holloway et al. 2013; Klass 2006). Holloway et al.'s findings suggest the main ways that bereaved family members make sense of the continuing presence of the deceased (2013). First, there is the physicality of them through things left behind. Second is the continuation of self through the memories of them. Third, the bereaved make meaning and perceive presence through the legacy left behind. Fourth is through the love the bereaved still have for the deceased.

> I was his power of attorney. He chose me. And that very same day [funeral] I found out he had a life insurance policy on him. He gave half for me and half for his father. While on a break from the 8 hour long funeral visitation, the VSO came, informed of the policy, and said, "I want you to know. The day your son was killed, you became a gold star mother," and he gave me the pin and said, "and these pins are for you." And I had to choose who to give the pins to. I gave one to his father, his grandfather, my mother. To his sister and his brother. It is the pin that has the gold star in it and all that. – Jada

It was at the funeral that some mothers received their gold star pins or were told about gold star mothers. Some were invited to gold star meetings, while others made it through the entire process without ever hearing the name "gold star". For parents of children with spouses, hierarchy is negotiated. There may be tension between the spouse and parents. Even among non-spouses, confusion, misinformation, and interpersonal conflict can arise during the funeral process. About 20% of participants described some familial tension after the death either through ex-spouses, their child's significant others, or other family members. Beyond that, at least half of the participants had heard of a gold star family that experienced significant familial tensions including a secret grandchild, a

spouse giving away clothing instead of giving them to the mother, and an aunt refusing to accept conversation about her late nephew at the family gathering.

> I feel like I almost got the flag as an afterthought. But that was not the fault of the gold star mothers. There were some friends of his that really didn't know where their boundaries were during the whole funeral arrangement. We were so busy trying to make them understand they were crossing boundaries. I had been told there was a flag for me. I had been told there was a sticker for me. I had been told there was a United States Flag for me. And I didn't even get that until we had been home almost a month before I got it in the mail. We had to ask for it. It was never presented to me. He wouldn't be here if my mom wasn't my mom. He had not been married long. Only, a week before he deployed. I understand that wife was his widow and she was listed as next of kin. But poor her, she was absolutely incapacitated. She couldn't make any decisions. And the friends who were crossing boundaries tried to have him buried in this family cemetery he absolutely wouldn't have wanted. And they wanted to release to the press that he was this indignant orphaned kid who never had a family. They printed a retraction of course. My family went to war with them. The funeral directors, we knew, they stepped in and talked to the widow that he needed to be buried in our woods. We have a lot of family buried in this cemetery and in fact he's now buried between my mother and my brother. A funeral director asked us if it would be appropriate to send us a gold star flag and a gold star sticker. She told the GSM our story so they had the flag folded and ready. But, the Navy told them they would only present two flags, they would not present three. One would go to his widow. The other would go to his biological mother. My family went to war and so did all of his friends. How did we get completely taken out of this equation? – Jane and Matt

For Jane and Matt, others in their son's social network crossed social boundaries and released a public narrative that disrupted the family story and dynamic. They narratively erased Jane and Matt as adoptive parents. As a result, Jane, Matt, and Matt's family were forced to engage in public relations and legacy work almost immediately after their son's death. This event challenged their status as parents and became a challenge for control over their son's story.

Burials vary for gold star families. Those who chose to bury their loved ones in Arlington have less say in procedure and personalization. Those who bury elsewhere may

have more say and more visits. Those living near a Caisson facility may choose to have them present. Holloway (et al 2013) argues that the burial marks a rite of passage for the deceased loved ones. It is when the body becomes separate from the person. It becomes a corpse ready to be buried, scattered, or otherwise disposed of. Through this process, one must consider the philosophical questions of life after death. Their views then weave into a tapestry of meaning and legacy, as we see throughout this manuscript. In softer terms, the burial marks one of the last acts a parent can perform for their child's physical being. It is the last time they get to lay their child down. The final tuck in. It is through death rituals that the community says goodbye to the physical person that was.

The cameras soon leave as quickly as they appeared. The crowds disperse. The town returns to normal. But the everyday life of the mother is still adjusting. This begins a year of heartbreaking firsts without them: first birthday, first holidays, first celebrations, first laughter, first death anniversary. Through symbols of remembrance, storytelling, and personalization of the deceased, their social self is transformed into its post-death version.

The New Normal And New Rituals

"The new normal is a life without him". – Sherry.

How do gold star mothers make sense of their lives without their son or daughter? Some gold star mothers lost their only child. Some face grieving one child while still raising others. For all, a state of anomie has occurred. Holidays often do not feel like something to celebrate. Some participants spoke of needing to leave town or even the country for Christmas to get away from their traditions and the reminders that holidays carry with them. Others spoke of new traditions, like taking a bottle of whisky or a picnic to a grave site, commemorating the death day or the angel birthday. Tensions arise when

the insurance paperwork is not updated, sending the life insurance money to the wrong person, or when the spouse prevents the grandparents from seeing their grandchildren. The impact of the loss does not stop on the battlefield. It often rearranges the paths of the parents, siblings, friends, spouses, and children, and can reorganize the family structure.

Buckle and Fleming's (2011) research on parenting after the death of a child explores the meanings of parenthood and bereavement, the experiences of re-negotiating self and family, and what is described as a reclaiming of one's life. The authors interview mothers and fathers who had lost at least one child, ages ranging from thirteen to thirty-one, and still had another living child in the home, half of which were now only children. For Buckle and Fleming, analyzing these experiences attempts to explain the ways in which parents grieve and reconstruct their identities with their deceased child, with themselves, and with their partner or other family members, and with their living children.

Four types of loss are explored. The first is the physical loss of the child experienced by the absence, the disruption in family and daily life, and the omission of one's extended self (Belk, 1988; Gabel, 2015). The second loss affects the family unit. Even if remaining children are still present in the household, the family is forever changed. A parent of two becomes the parent of two with only one child living. The surviving child becomes an only child. One less stocking at Christmas, and the line for the bathroom each morning becomes noticeably shorter. This alters routine, experiences, emotions, communication, and family identity. The third loss pertains to the expectations of the deceased child and family. Planned vacations, unkept promises, hopes, and dreams for the child dissipate. Survivors face a reality of growing up and navigating life's

transitions without the lost loved one. The fourth level of loss for families is the loss of security and assurance. There is a sense of comfort that is lost during a tragedy. Afterwards, the world can seem less safe, relationships less secure, and life more vulnerable.

Parents of surviving children face down the new normal of "bereaved parenting" (Buckle and Fleming, 2011:37). DeGroot and Carmack (2011) describe reconstructing a new normal as a grief coping mechanism. Murray (2001) argues that the new normal acknowledges not only the loss of the loved one but also the loss of their presence in daily living, traditions, and important events going forward. The parent then bereaves the things that could have been. Bereaved parenting bridges the duality between life and death, mourning the layered loss of a child while continuing to parent a living child (Buckle and Fleming 2011). Using a shattered mirror and refracting glass analogy, Buckle and Fleming argue that losing a child is unique to every person and every relationship. There are multiple shards laying on the floor, pointing at and overlapping the other. The shards do not go back together, like new. Even if one were to solder them in place, the lead would still be visible. Likewise, bereaved parenting means recognizing that life, self, and family will never be the way it was before the mirror broke, but that it is necessary to reclaim what they can by attempting to regenerate self and family. This new regeneration, like the broken mirror, will not be smooth or perfect. The loss never leaves. But, the regenerating or reconstructing of a new normal is necessary for the maintenance of the family.

> His birthday is hard for me. His death date is hard for me. Mother's day is really the hardest day because, he always called me and he was always the first one to call. Of all of my kids, he was always the first one to call. I have built a memorial in my front yard that has an arch way, red roses, and

> forget me knots. I have a chair sitting out there. Usually on his birth date and death date I go out there, sit in the chair, and just spend some time with him. – Trina

For Trina, holidays that center on her child or her relationship to her children are difficult. She is reminded of the life he lived and is met with the reality that he is no longer here. She cannot celebrate his birthday with him. He is not going to call on Mother's day. Instead, she maintains a relationship with him in part through creating a sacred place where she feels his presence. Through linking her present world with the otherworldly, she has created a new normal for these particular days.

> For his angel-versary we have done balloons in the sky which are now illegal in our state. I've done other things. On Facebook, I will post, "Show me a picture of you drinking a shot of Jack Daniels for Eric on his angel-versary." I have never started a foundation. There's too many of them. I could go work for them. There's our Facebook page in remembrance of Eric. I will put up quotes, pictures, and there's a black band I have on my wrist, forever in your heart. Sometimes people pick it up and I get a strange message of someone who found it. When we go on vacation, we take them with us and leave them behind [for people to google his story and to learn more about him]. – Charlotte

Leaving the bands and information about Eric are a way for Charlotte to spread her son's legacy beyond her social network. Leaving tokens or linking objects for others to find and learn more about their loved one is not uncommon in the GSMO world. In addition to spreading a story or legacy, it is a way for family members to "take" the loved one "with them" during travels. Some take pictures of their child's token in a special, new, or beautiful place similar to how the living will take selfies at the Grand Canyon or anywhere they find meaningful.

> What we do on his birthday – his favorite meal was macaroni and cheese and Boston cream pie. My daughter and her kids come over every year on his birthday and we eat mac and cheese and Boston cream pie. We will

> write messages on those lanterns you release in the air (luminaries). – Barbara

Similar to Trina and many other mothers like her, Barbara attempts to bridge realities and connect with her son on his birthday. Instead of a sacred garden, Barbara and family write messages, akin to birthday cards, and send them to the heavens in hopes they will find him. Barbara also recreates his favorite meal, recreating as much as possible the sensory experience of her memories – familiar smells, tastes, textures.

Every single holiday takes on new meaning. Birthdays are spent on cemetery grounds. Veterans day, Memorial day, Mother's day have drastically different connotations as they serve as linking phenomena (Gabel, 2015; Volkan, 1981), that spark heavier reminders of their children, what was, and what can no longer be. When asked about the new normal, one mother described traveling abroad for the holidays to shake things up. Others described the pain each significant event brings. There are nieces and nephews who will never meet their uncles, sisters who will miss their siblings weddings, grandchildren who will never have the chance to be born. With these, are the loss of dreams for their children. Because of age, many of their children never had the chance to fall in love, marry, have children, graduate college, start that new business, and see their siblings grow up. One mother in the interview wondered if her son had ever even experienced romance with a woman before he died. Had he even had his first kiss?

The new normal exists in subtle and sometimes extreme ways. It may mean clarifying the answer when asked how many children you have. It is changing up traditions or modifying old ones to fit the physical absence. The normal is managing expectations of who will call on Mother's day and mourning missed milestones. For some mothers, the new normal means changing jobs or moving houses. It sometimes

means joining organizations or forming foundations. Creating the new normal is a process of meaning making and adjustment. As life evolves, the new normal continues to evolve. More milestones pass and more losses are felt.

As I move toward the conclusion of this chapter, I want to share an account from Ruth. In this, Ruth shares her knock on the door story. She takes us through information seeking and mentions not attending her son's visitation. It is worth noting that at the time of his death, American protestant funeral trends often discouraged displays of emotion (Ramshaw 2009). This account ends with the challenges Ruth faced both in terms of parenting roles and carving out a new normal. In a way, Ruth's story sums up elements from this chapter into a brief account.

Ruth's Story

One of my oldest participants was Ruth, a reserved Vietnam mom, adored by her chapter members and largely overlooked by everyone else. Ruth seemed fine by that. She had a slight accent that I would learn was because she was raised in Germany. She met her husband, a Tennessean, there and the two married. Her eldest son was born there and the small family moved to the United States a short time later. Ruth was a young mother of three by the time her eldest, barely 18, eagerly enlisted to help fight in Vietnam. "I think he thought it was going to be something it wasn't. I think he realized that the longer he stayed."

Sitting across from Ruth in a secluded hotel hallway, I watched as withered hands rose towards her face, eyes closed for a brief moment as she recounted the night she believed her son was killed. It was the week of Christmas, just a few days before the holiday.

> And I woke up to a sound. A bang or thud outside. In those days we had a window unit. You know, the kind that hang outside. And I heard this thud on it. I thought it must have been a rock hitting the unit or something. But now, I don't think so. I think the sound was him getting shot. I do. I think that was the moment he died. A mother knows.

Ruth, her husband, and their surviving children were notified the next day that their son had been killed. The sound outside her window coincided approximately with the estimated time of death of her son and the thud Ruth relates to the gunshot. The reconstruction of events fit within the cultural script of the good mother, connected to her children. As Ruth says, "A mother knows."

The year was 1968, they were not given many details, and were left largely to piece together his story on their own. Ruth did not view Gary in the casket but her husband did. He reported to Ruth that Gary had all of his limbs intact but he noticed the uniform was pulled up a little high. He pulled down the collar and found the bullet hole in the neck. Now, in 2021, his death is officially listed as the result of small arms fire.

Ruth's story doesn't end there. About 9 months after Gary's death, Ruth's husband passed away. Alone, grieving, and raising two children, Ruth moved to her husband's hometown and closer to his and Gary's gravesites. A gold star mother and widowed, Ruth still had the responsibility of raising her two younger children and Ruth was left to learn how to be a mother to both the living and the lost. This research explores this juxtaposition of life, loss, and creating a legacy. The mothers I have spoken with have all talked about the impact of loss, creating new traditions and routines, hanging onto mementos or linking objects (Gabel, 2015; Volkan, 1981) that connect them with their child. The world continues moving forward and they have to adapt to a new normal.

Chapter Conclusion: Vilhoma

Sitting at a French style restaurant, a mother, clad in white sits across from me. There are two other gold star mothers with us. Each of them are mothers of only children who have bonded in part because of that experience of losing their only child in combat related death. The mother opposite of me tells us a story of previously meeting an older gold star mom. The older mom was elderly and wearing a picture of her fallen child. "At first I wondered if it was her grandson and then I realized, it was her son. She had just aged and he didn't. [pause] I realized that one day that's going to be me. I'm going to be old with all these wrinkles and wearing a picture of this kid [emphasis on kid]". – Monica

Other participants expressed similar feelings. This notion that the parent ages and the child remains forever young is one that is unnatural and complicated. He never had a chance to realize a career or profession or those goals that he had. There is happiness at the peer's success, a desire to honor who was, and grief at what never could be. "It hurts when you… all of the boys his age all went into the service. One retired and has a family and children. So it hurts when those kids come home and I look at them and see how they aged. And Junie is always 21."

Reconciling this loss is vilohma – an unnatural occurrence. We like to think that parents are not supposed to bury their children. Knock on the door stories describe moments gold star mothers were officially notified of their child's death. This served as a memory pinpoint for participants when constructing the narratives of their gold star stories. For them, learning their child had passed thrust them into a whirlwind of emotions, information seeking, identity reconstruction, legacy making, and learning how to make sense of their lives without their children. Through the funeral, burial, and events

surrounding these, the family is able to regain control of the body and the narrative of who their child was. Media, community, politics, military, and familial discourse and expectations swirl around the immediate family, and may be drawn on as sense making tools. Once buried, the parenting role transitions fully from caring for the physical child to nurturing their child's memory or legacy. Parent's then may seek purpose for their child's life and death, wishing to understand more about who their child was, and find meaning that is larger than the child's physical self.

Each day a bereaved parent wakes up and walks through the world without their child still living in it, each missed birthday, each death date reminding them of the anniversary forces upon them another new normal. Understanding more about the new normal helps us learn more about loss and the social processes of grief. Looking at it through the lens of bereaved parents provides additional insight into the loss of a child. As one participant bluntly stated, "Death is permanent and there's nothing you will be able to do about it. You have to learn to deal with it." These new practices and traditions creep in small and large ways. These experiences, and more, address key questions like, how one does family and motherhood after loss, how new meanings are constructed, experienced, and expressed, and what it is to be a mother. National and organizational narratives may have familiarized the term, "new normal", but the act and process itself of creating one seems nearly universal. It is how mothers choose to take control of that new reality and make sense of it that is at times influenced by the larger embedded discourses and group affiliation of nation, organization, politics, and religion. These discourses are then used in their social mapping to help re-construct their identities and shape legacy.

CHAPTER FIVE: POLITICS AND SPECTACLE

While GSMO claims to be an apolitical organization focused on patriotism, veteran's service work, and continuing their loved one's legacies, their very symbol and organizational foundations began through the political system. Hodgkin and Radstone (2003) argue that memory is intricately tied to nationalism. It is both a necessity and a problem. Nationalism depends on certain collective memories to continue forward. Memories like the pain, trauma, and devastation caused on September 11, 2001 and the cost of that day over the past twenty years are important for evoking a sense of national unity, despite the fact that disunity was felt by American Sikhs among others the very next day. Gold star stories are used in politics as a way of reminding people of the loss and sacrifice of others ostensibly for the national good. The story is pushed forward and gold star stories become political talking points, spectacle, and propaganda. GSMO's mission includes promoting nationalism.

Grief Politics

As mentioned in the beginning of this work as representation of mothers and families who had lost military servicemen/women, the gold star was nationally recognized at the executive and legislative levels of government. The founding of the organization had Congressional approval. Membership is often tied directly to the Department of Defense and current federal-legal parameters. Furthermore, gold star mothers actively work with United States representatives, generals, and administrations to usher in bills and motions. They meet with federal organizations and serve on the Veterans Affairs board. When asked during an interview, a past national president

responded that the organization's political line is drawn only at the level of blatant endorsement.

> "We have to work with any administration. If Clinton had of won, we would have had to work with her. So that is where we draw the line. We don't want to be seen as the Gold Star Mothers endorsing one administration over the other."

Their very existence is an expression of grief *in* politics through their impact on laws and bills, as well as their organization's charter. By the phrase, grief in politics, I refer to the ways grief is used as a motivating factor to propose and pass rules, laws, bylaws, motions, hold board positions, and influence the political grind locally, regionally, and nationally. Examples of grief in politics include the parents of the Sandy Hook shooting victims who formed an organization, Sandy Hook Promise (Sandy Hook Promise 2021), geared around efforts to increase gun regulations and school shooting prevention. Another example are experiences shared by Covid 19 survivors and families of those who have passed due to the coronavirus. Sharing their experiences provide an emotional narrative and may persuade those on the fence about vaccinations and social distancing. For gold star mothers, grief in politics produces discussions on exiting theatre, entering into a warzone, returning bodies, establishing gold star mother's weekend, creating programs for survivors, engaging in local political initiatives, and serving in legislative capacities. Monuments are built because of grief in politics. They are erected as physical reminders cementing its names and depiction within national and local stories (Bellentani and Panico 2016). The monument serves as a linking object designed to connect the people behind the names to a patriotic story of honor and valor (Goss and Klass 2005).

The presence of these outcomes, the nationally aligned patriotic agendas of the organization and of the mothers are depictions of politics of grief. In the phrase "politics *of* grief" I refer to their social impact on *how* military death is discussed and perceived on a wider scale often through spectacle and as a performative action without formalized change. How individual families, national media, and the collective story of these losses influences nationalism. It can instill pride, shame, disgust, or honor. These stories are designed to reach those outside of the immediate impact zone. We broadcast the stories through staged debates on bringing people home rather than actively passing legislation to do so. Politics of grief is the spectacle and the promotion. This is not exclusive to military bereavement. Politics of grief often surround social movements and current events that may signal values or sway voters. An example is when some members of Congress knelt in Emancipation Hall in front of cameras for 8 minutes and 46 seconds in response to the killing of George Floyd (Mathes 2020). In this case, congress members promote a spectacle of death by way of the organized tribute and broadcast political signals to the public. For gold star families, it is used to perpetuate and distribute pro military and pro country sentiment, and telegraph that even through extreme loss remains pride and a belief in the moral correctness of our nation. The invitations to the White House, the photo ops with the governor, the televised celebrations honoring gold star families, all speak to the nation in a politically laden fashion.

> "It was extremely public. We were in every newspaper. So, not only do you find out your son was killed, but in 24 hours we had seen it in the NYT, the Chicago Tribune, and local news. It was very public when I lost my son, Joshua" – Vanna

> For some reason, I came through the back door that day. Because of where I worked, I was able to get a lot of the details. They actually list him as killed in action on the 19th but missing on the 17th. When people ask when

> he died, we always say the 19th. Aljazeera posted a video of the crash on their site. There were two helicopters that day. One that was filming and one that was actually doing it. When we saw that we absolutely knew there was no way he had survived. – Matt and Jane

> "Sometimes I feel like we are asked to do stuff like parades, parading us all around. Sometimes I feel like they are just using us. It feels like they are just showing us off. Gold star mothers, from my understanding, are not to be political." – Donna

The media coverage, showing footage of final moments, and inviting mothers to relive their loss on public stages all serve the political spectacle. In at least one case, a mother was called the day after her son's death. It was a military public relations specialist. She assured the mother that she wouldn't have to say a thing to the public. She (the PR specialist) would take care of the media.

Who counts is determined by politics in grief, with the organization and local chapters debating and deciding on their group inclusion criteria. While, walks for veteran suicide and raising awareness of PTSD operate on the outside as politics of grief. How gold star mothers operate on national levels, the stories they share and ways in which they narrate their experiences shape how we view war, conflict, loss, and valor.

When used as spectacle, gold star mothers may serve in ways that reinforce national political narratives and work as agents of discursive distribution through politics of grief. "It makes me very angry that they used, USED, gold star families for political reasons. That man's son died honorably. Don't use gold star families for gain." – Tracy

What I mean by agents of discursive distribution is that gold star mothers may be used to spread pro-American and pro-military messages, therefore distributing the patriotic discourses that in turn serve their narratives of who they are and what they stand for. The organization also uses its political power to maintain their standing, group identity, and status as an Inc, while the country uses their experiences and existence to

further support its war endeavors, sense of moral valor, and to indebt generations into its ideology.

Gold star families are integral to upholding the patriotic narratives of a valorous and meaningful death. Counter narratives or negative claims that might jeopardize these sentiments are often overlooked and underrepresented in mainstream media in the current post 9/11 United States. While anti-war and political efforts have dominated media in the past, Gold Star Mother's Organization Inc joined an initiative to attempt to rectify this. The initiative was the 50th commemoration pin, acknowledging the start of the Vietnam War. GSMO members across the country held private and public ceremonies, distributing these pins to any Vietnam era veteran.

The first commemorative pinning moment I witnessed took place informally at a fundraiser for a state chapter. We were at a motorcycle shop. Hamburgers were on the grill outside. Chips, drinks, and other food were on sale. Mothers were sitting in matching t-shirts inside manning the fundraising booth. They collected money for food, t-shirts, and "passports" for each of the franchised motorcycle stores in the state. Those who visited each store during the summer timeframe were eligible for a prize. The mood was light. Customers would approach to buy something or inquire about the fundraiser. One was a Vietnam veteran. He spoke about the discomfort he felt after returning home from service and disclosed that at times he would chose to hide that he ever served because of the stigma he felt from it. "I was spit on when I returned. That's what they did. Someone actually spit on me." Tears swelled in his eyes as the gold star mother picked up the commemorative lapel pin and asked to give it to him. "This is meant to thank you. We know it does not make up for the way things were, but we appreciate now what you did.

On behalf of a grateful nation, welcome home." The gold star mother then gave the veteran a hug. This was the first of eight similar moments at this event.

The organization responsible for the commemorative pins is the United States of America Vietnam War Commemoration also known as Vietnam War 50th. It was created during the Obama administration by the Secretary of Defense department and authorized by Congress in 2012. Groups such as GSMO may sign up as partners to assist in finding and honoring Vietnam era veterans and their families. The project lists five main missions (Vietnamwar50th 2020). 1) To thank and honor Vietnam veterans and their families. 2) To shine a light on the service of the U.S. military and federal agencies that contributed to the efforts in Vietnam. 3) To pay contributions to those efforts on the home front. 4) "To highlight the technology, science, and medicine related to military research co)ducted during the Vietnam War" (Vietnamwar50th 2020). 5) To recognize efforts of U.S. allies during the Vietnam War. Gold Star Mothers as a partner to this organization take it upon themselves to deal out honor, valor, and to speak on behalf of the nation. Participants distribute the patriotic narratives that the military is honorable even with its contested decisions, and that through service comes valor.

Supportive and patriotic groups like Gold Star Mothers Organization Inc, communicate that the sacrifice is worth something. Through emotion coding, they signal that the President, country, and government are in the moral right. They humanize the loss just enough to convey the importance of valorizing our fallen servicemembers and honoring their sacrifice through patriotic actions and events. These displays most often occur in very controlled moments, like a memorial day ceremony or a televised Christmas special. Giving limelight to immediately grieving family members, even if

fictional, introduces a danger (Douglas 1966) from the margins. Gold Star Mothers hold the power of national response. “With the affiliation and the connection with our organization and with the military, it can be very detrimental. We could do a lot of damage bad or good with the military.” – a past national board member. They can support, encourage, and promote valor, patriotism, and lobby for laws meant to honor. They can also depict a loss that is too great, anger at the government, distrust, and disillusionment as is demonstrated in the following excerpts.

> About 3 weeks after Greg was killed I got the “Oh, I’m sorry letter” from Bush which really ticked me off. I had Senator Kennedy, Kerry, Lincoln, Cheney, call me personally. I actually wrote the president a letter and expected a response and never got a response. I told him I was disappointed it took three weeks to receive a letter. Being that the numbers appear to be climbing with this war, I feel there should be half a dozen men and women that represent you at the White House that should come to every funeral. – Polly

> I was a principal and it was my second year. I had to step back. But as a principal when that happened, I wanted accountability. If someone were to come into a school I’m over and take a child, I would be held accountable because I’m the leader of that school. I wanted someone to be held accountable for that ship. I wanted someone to be held accountable to what happened to my son. – Renee

> They left him there. You hear about “no man left behind”, but they left him there. He knew you don’t go flying on a recovery mission after dragging for mines all day. They [command] didn’t do anything. The report says he was very verbally [against it]. – Matt.

The parents above wanted acknowledgement of loss and accountability. Some families were left cobbling together what information they could. “It was heavily redacted. I read more because of my job. Otherwise we wouldn’t know anything.” – Matt. As mentioned in chapter four, lack of information is a common frustration that many gold star families experience. In the excerpt below, Judith describes what she knows of her son’s final moments. For her, this knowledge is a blessing.

> He volunteered that morning to go out because another group of soldiers were pinned down in a cemetery. They never should have been sent in there and it was an ambush. So, he was going in to save them and when they came into the market place and went around the corner, the IED took out the first Humvee and killed all in there. He and his staff sergeant were in the second Humvee. They had gotten out and were running to a building for cover because the IED had hit their Humvee and killed most in that. As my son was running, he was shot about 6 times. [Staff Sergeant survived]. The Staff Sergeant said he doesn't know why he didn't take any fire. He's kept in touch with all of the family. The Navy corpsman was trying to save one of our sergeants and was killed. They saved a few that did make it to a little hut to get covered. They saved about 8 of them. I didn't find out until ten years later when we had a reunion and the guys were so excited to see each other and were opening up about stories. That's when I found out a lot about my son. It was bitter sweet.
>
> It was a year later before I really found out what happened. We were at an anniversary event and all these former crewmen were there telling stories. That's when I really learned what happened.
>
> Bad guys dragged him into a pile of garbage. He could still have been considered missing in action. I am so thankful that one of his buddies saw him and got him. They saw an antenna sticking up and went to investigate. He was a radio operator at that time. And they went up to the antenna and there was my son. I am so thankful he was able to come home so I could bury him and know where he is at now. I count those little blessings. It's hard sometimes but I count them.

Some mothers were grateful to get anything back.

> I was grateful to get what we did of his body back. He died from blunt force trauma so his head was. But we were glad to get his body back. I was grateful for that. Because of the way the attack happened, some were in the sea, other's body parts were mangled together with the ship."

Some mothers were angry. Some wanted accountability. Others were desperate for information and grateful for what they did have. Families are left to accept what they have been dealt and to step into the national discourses and meanings of valor and honor surrounding the military and service member loss. The context that the child died constructed whether or not it was a good death (Hallam et al 2005; Meier et al. 2016). Was it fast? Was it honorable? Were they aware? Did the family receive them intact?

Aspects that reflected the good death were met with gratitude. Those whose sons died from suicide or accident focused on more positive qualities. One's son left a note that he loved his God, family, and country. Comfort was taken in last cups of coffee together and how good he was as a son. His death was reconstructed by the mother from suicide to war related suicide. The argument is that if the suicide is related to service connected PTSD, then it is like they never left the battlefield. Mothers of accidental deaths argued that their children may not have been in the accident if they had not been on base. In these cases, they are not blaming the military for their son's death but are connecting its role. Doing so brings it closer to that honorable death. One mother, whose son died in a bicycle accident on base, believed her son made a pact with God to allow her to care for him for weeks before he died. This, from her perspective, elevated his death as something arranged and pre-designed.

In 2004, Cindy Sheehan was made a gold star mother when her son, Casey was killed in action. Angry with then President Bush and the "unjust war on Iraq", she delved into anti-war activism. She spoke at anti-war events including the memorable traveling exhibit that saw combat boots set out for each fallen service member. She wrote letters to the President and even camped outside his personal ranch (Sheehan, 2004). Sheehan wrote two books on her loss and experience and founded the group, Gold Star Families For Peace – though it is unclear if the group is still active. Searches for their group come up with inactive links and error code pages.

Mothers like Sheehan who do not support ongoing war or the mainline narratives do exist and try to be heard. But, they are matter out of place (Douglas 1966), quickly brushed to the side, overlooked, and not elevated through media representation.

Broadcasting this is to disrupt the perceived purity of grieving mothers, jeopardizing the status quo and questioning our national morality. On occasion, roughly every election cycle, a gold star family will be asked to speak on a political platform. In 2016, the family was Khizr and Ghazala Khan (Bruton 2016).

The broadcast of the Khan family on the stage of the Democratic National Convention (DNC) was a catalyst of this research project. Sitting on the couch with my spouse, a gold star sibling, we watched as Khizr Khan pulled out his pocket constitution and spoke through the camera directly to then Presidential Candidate Donald Trump. The summer before, we had attended a gold star convention with my mother-in-law. We were fresh off of our honeymoon and directly into a sea of white. White clothes, white hair on some, and mostly white mothers. The hot southern sun and deep humid air brought out a level of realness in the faces of people beneath their melting makeup. We were introduced to several gold star mothers. I listened to their heartfelt and earth shattering stories. I laughed as they recalled funny moments and smiled at pictures of their most precious grandchildren. We held hands during an important moment at the final banquet, which I will describe in more detail in a latter chapter. Several of these mothers are connected with me on social media.

In the days following the DNC speech, I scrolled through Facebook reading reactions and the subsequent political aftermath. People who had never heard of a gold star family were espousing their opinions and accusations on every platform I followed. Everyone was talking about this – everyone except the gold star mothers in my network. In at least half the nation's eyes, the Khans had inserted themselves as matter out of place

and a danger to the mainstream, certainly a danger to the opposing political party whose entire campaign was built ostensibly on the greatness of America.

Sitting on the same couch, reading through our newsfeeds, my spouse proposed I transition my dissertation research over to gold star mothers. “I don’t know. I don’t want to exploit anyone.” “People need to know more than… this.” I considered how I could conduct this research in a way that is both critical, analytical, sociological, yet still sensitive to the humanity and loss of the real people thrust at the center of this project. I knew I needed to touch on this political moment but I wanted to expand and cover a broader perspective because gold star mothers are more than the political spectacle we see played over our electronic devices.

Grief as National Spectacle

This section explores grief and death as spectacle in live streamed news, entertainment, and in how that relates to political and organizational narratives of deservingness.

School children across the nation watched live in horror when the Twin Towers fell. I remember the fear and confusion. “Tory’s uncle was on a plane today! Could it be one of those?!” “What’s all that smoke?” “Why are people jumping from buildings? Can’t they catch them in the air? I heard you can jump from a sixth floor and still live, but it’s really difficult.” “Run! Why is he getting behind the car? Did the camera man die? Mrs. Wendy, did the camera man die?” Students cried. Teachers gathered in the hall processing and asking whether they should allow us to continue watching it. We watched in every class throughout the rest of the school day. I don’t blame them. Many of them had already watched scenes from the Vietnam war streamed to their televisions and as

educators, most had witnessed the explosion of the Challenger in real time. Nearly 20 years later, we reflect on those times and now recognize the influx of patriotism that immediately followed that day. Star spangled everything hit the stores. Customers proudly and somewhat indignantly yelled, “Freedom fries, I said FREEDOM fries,” in the McDonald’s drive thru intercom.

Blogs surrounding the 19th anniversary glorified these days banking on the nostalgia to recall a sense of patriotic community. But, these times were also incredibly tense and life altering. Arab Americans, anyone brown, Sikhs, Muslims, and anyone with a non-white sounding last name were at risk of suspicion and violence. In United States history, patriotism and valor is often reserved only for white society with the proud, white Captain America type symbol as their hero. This is evident not just in our media portrayals of who an American soldier is, but in the treatment of service members of color. Black veterans were largely excluded from G.I. benefits during the Jim Crow Era. The Battle of Bamber Bridge in World War II saw white U.S. soldiers fighting against black U.S. soldiers in England over segregation. In 2021, an estimated 73% of commissioned military officers are white, with the next highest group ranking in at just 8% (Stafford et al. 2021). Allegations in a 2021 PBS news hour by service members describe an ongoing racism problem in the U.S. military through frequent slurs, discriminatory practices, cultural censorship from officers, and the existence of race extremists in the service (Stafford et al. 2021).

One gold star mom watched the events of September 11, 2001 and described feeling a tingling sensation. She knew that somehow, this was going to be the end of her son. He signed up before the attacks with plans of using his GI Bill for school. After the

attacks, he volunteered to head out on one of the first missions. For many other young people, these events motivated them to enlist. “He said he needed to go. He wanted to do his part on the war on terror” – Jane.

From the initial invasion in Iraq in March 2003 until December 2004, 1,275 service members were killed and at least 9,765 were wounded (DMDC 2021). This number would continually increase for over a decade. In theatre deaths have occurred as late as 2021 with the loss of 13 service members as the United States demobilized from Afghanistan. We have reached over seven thousand in military or military contracted civilians killed-in-action, not including those who have died from PTSD induced suicide, complications, burn-pit related cancers, accidents, and more. If we were to add in suicide related deaths alone, that number increases to nearly 100,000 (Suitt 2021).

A show airing around 2007, “Army Wives” attempts some gold star representation through one of their main characters, Denise. Mitchell (2003) argues that art and memory are used to propagate political agendas promoting nationalism. In Army Wives, viewers are introduced to Denise as the dutiful army wife to a non-commissioned officer and mother to a troubled teen. The show tackles the complexities of army families managing deployments, PTSD, hierarchies, service work, and raising families. The characters come from different social positions and lived experiences, who are then grouped together in a way that conveys loyalty, an organizational family, supported by their common bond of being Army affiliated. The message is that if you are one of us, we will have your six.

In latter seasons, Denise becomes a gold star mother when her now older and enlisted son is killed in theatre. Viewers follow her grief process without ever seeing her

connect with other gold star families or demonstrating any other grieving patterns. Instead, it takes an isolation stance, and she is perceived as alone in a vacuum. While most of my participants will say that nobody else can experience another's individual loss, they will also admit that connecting with others who have a common bond helps. Denise continues to honor her son's memory, but without branching outside of her Army group. Her story line at this point is centered on remembering her son and finding a way forward within the Army family. It both promotes the military community while neglecting or at least diverting focus from the Gold Star one. While Army Wives doesn't take that approach, it could have benefitted from introducing at least a few other gold star moms throughout its seven seasons and one hundred and seventeen episodes.

Battle's (2019) work on cultural categories analyzes perceptions of those on government assistance by drawing comparisons between "war widows" and "drive by widows" to demonstrate exemplars of deservingness. Battle argues that the war widow is viewed as more deserving of governmental assistance than the drive by mother because the societal perception of her husband's death is that of honor and morality while the spousal death for the drive by widow represents a lack of honor and lack of morality. Adopting this notion of deservingness, I demonstrate in later chapters how valor and honor serve as their own categories of deservingness among gold star mothers. Gold star mothers experience social privilege in how they are perceived, how the loss of their sons or daughters are honored, and through the reception of federally recognized benefits. Even within the context of gold star mothers, is a status hierarchy of deservingness and valor in relation to how the child died. Those whose son or daughter was killed in action are perceived to be at the top of this hierarchy. They are the ones who deserve the pin

with the purple background. Those who lost a son or daughter to service member or veteran suicide are positioned as less deserving and some even argue they should not be allowed to join the GSMO. Expanding from Battle's work, I focus more on valor than morality. *Valor* represents high morality but *not valorous* does not indicate a lack of morality or immorality. The more valorous a death, the more deserving of honor and that social privilege. For gold star mothers, stories of valor and honor are narratively constructed and contested through death stories.

Grieving families are socially sacred because of their "deservingness" and their loved one's valor. At times, gold star stories mirror religious stories of Christ and his Mother Mary. Like Christ, gold star mother's children sacrificed their lives for the common good. Like Mary, they held and cradled their heroes as babies and wept for them after their burial. They then carry on their child's legacy through spreading the news of their child's sacrifice and the values their child was willing to die for. Parallel themes link religious ideology and this national story of military bereavement and sacrifice, emboldening that sense of deservingness of mothers. At the same time, they are also matter without place and potentially dangerous. Anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966) argued that members of society maintain its sense of purity by avoiding aspects that are outside of the social patterns. By looking at the heartache, the loss of the whole person, and the ways that a service member's death may shatter their family system, we must reconcile our part or our society's part in that loss. In other words, we must dirty our hands a little with guilt and national accountability. Showcasing too much of a family's loss dirties our societal consciousness, therefore we often hide it, and limit our acknowledgement to formal and specified periods of time. These times are patriotic

holidays, the immediate aftermath of a mass tragedy, and the week of a funeral. Beyond these times, discussing a family's grief is out of place. Mothers illustrate this when they describe neighbors, community members, and even extended family who make statements like, "Aren't you over that yet?" "Let's not talk about John." "I can't listen to this anymore." Even when it comes to experiencing grief, we like to think of it in quick stages.

Whoever marketed Kubler-Ross's (1969) work on the five stages of grief did an excellent job. Many assume denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance are concrete steps. Taking too long in any of these is a feeling rules breach (Hochschilds 1979; 1983). "Grieving never ends, that's for sure. There's always a hole in their heart. It'll be fourteen years but it only feels like a couple."

Douglas's matter out of place is also seen in group, as I previously mentioned in regards to gold star families who speak against a political system, challenge war narratives, display anger for their loss, or engage in national politics in any way other than supporting the mainstream discourses of valor, honor, sacrifice, and secular holiness of military bereavement. In this sense, mothers are matter out of place in the larger narratives. In keeping with the religious parallel, they are seen as national atheists, discussed more in a later chapter.

Chapter Conclusion

Following up on the knock on the door experiences of gold star families, this chapter analyzes grief politics, spectacle of loss, and how these discourses shape understandings of a good death, honorable death, and deservingness of honor. With grief in politics, I convey how expressions of grief are used to influence politics, policies,

rules, and laws. For gold star families, stories of grief are used to fuel efforts towards local, regional, and national initiatives, with gold star mother's and the GSMO as leaders in these efforts. These have a direct impact on service members, veterans, veteran families, and military operations. In politics of grief and spectacle of grief, gold star families' grievances are put on display and are often used as political stances and debate talking points. It is a way to signify values, platforms, and causes to the public. Grief politics are used to maintain, support, and aide in the dissemination of national discourses. Gold star mothers often operate as agents of discursive distribution spreading the political agendas they are founded on.

Facing the massive deaths from World War I and the rise of suffragettes, President Woodrow Wilson was challenged with depleting national morale (Budreau 2010; 2021). Using grief in politics, a widow – Lisa M. Bowen, wrote an open letter in the New York Times (1917) promoting the creation of a gold star for families of fallen service members as a way to focus on the honor and national pride in their sacrifice rather than the grief and mourning (Budreau 2010; 2021). This was pushed further in letters to President Wilson by Caroline Seamon Reade, a mother of a fallen service member, who argued that acknowledging the "supreme sacrifice" of fallen soldiers might shift the narrative from loss to significance (Reade 1918).

In 1918, concerned that addressing the topic would insinuate his acceptance of high death tolls, President Wilson tasked suffragette Dr. Anna Shaw – who had previously used mothers of fallen service members as part of her platform – and the Council of National Defense – that Lisa Bowen was affiliated with to implement the adoption of gold stars (Budreau 2010; 2021). They were also asked to distribute the new

narrative of gold stars as a literal badge of honor for the wives and mothers of fallen service members. Again, here we see grief in politics but also politics of grief through the tactical advantage these initiatives had on influencing national narratives and supporting patriotic efforts.

We also see through this historical account how women were used as the agents of discursive distribution through shifting the national tone around service member loss. This set a precedence for the public spectacle potential for gold star members with the symbology of their stars speaking to a purpose larger than the individual's personal grief. In a way, gold star mothers are used as a brand to represent this commercialization of grief. It reflects the going concerns of patriotism and service member loss. They reach out to the community, serve on volunteer boards, and participate in public events distributing patriotic narratives. Through this emphasis on honor, comes distinctions of valor, an idea of a good or honorable death, and emphasized social layers of deservingness surrounding grief, thus creating a brand that is shiny, honorable, and culturally sacred. A soldier's sacrifice becomes something deserving of public attention, honor, and respect.

This manuscript focuses on gold star mothers, but these concepts are not relegated to gold star mothers or even gold star families. Grief in politics, politics of grief, and spectacle of grief applies to a range of issues and social movements. Discursive distribution is not relegated solely to patriotic narratives. Non service members may see good deaths and honorable deaths. As Battle shows, categories of deservingness are not limited to service member deaths. In the next chapter, I begin the convention and demonstrate how discourses and interpretations of deservingness and valor are reinforced and how legacy work continues to be shaped.

CHAPTER SIX: THE CONVENTION - SYMBOLS, CEREMONY, AND BONDS

This chapter is designed to set the tone of the convention through ethnographic descriptions of convention events, interviews, and organizational context. The convention operates as a discursive and emotionally expressive environment. Attendees are inundated with discourses surrounding grief and interpretations of what it means to become a gold star mother. This occurs through formal speeches, displays, and through informal conversations at the breakfast table, on the bus, in the hallway, and anywhere one can socialize. Prayers are given, flags are displayed, and symbols shine in the ballroom lights. Through the convention, one comes to connect gold star with Christian prayers, patriotic duty, and claims of service. Deservingness is constructed and stratified throughout the convention in both in group and out group contexts. The organization promotes the sanctity of gold star mothers, the valor of fallen service members, and the support of national endeavors in terms of war. Emotions shift rapidly with each event, creating a type of organized dance as I will describe later in this chapter. These discourses and interactions help reinforce the organizational identity and may influence sense making for individual gold star mothers. Part of the mission is purpose focused thus emphasizing to its members the need to create a legacy for one's child that is larger than themselves.

Day One: Introducing the Conventional Landscape and Contra Dance

We pull up next to the curve. We slowly exit the car, our unstretched legs pleading for patience as they remember how to stand. It has been a long ride. The evening sun has begun its decent behind the oak trees. Two middle aged women dressed in white approach. One calls out my mother-in-law's name. "Hey C.T.!" and "Hey Linus." The

other woman greets the service dog – a basset hound named after a character from Charlie Brown. They meet each other with large smiles, quick hugs, and the laughter of old friends. They are all gold star moms. My mother-in-law, a shorter, white, freckled, dark haired woman with dark rimmed glasses and the physical presence of a nearly retired school teacher, listens to the information and reads the subcontext of her friend. In thirty seconds, we greet members, get a recommendation for a place to eat, are informed of the friends' immediate plans and their room numbers, and learn about some of the drama that has already begun between the gold star moms. Then the friends are off on their way. We rapidly unpack the car, loading a dolly with suitcases, boxes of journals to be distributed, laptop bags, and garment bags.

Entering the lobby, we see more people wearing white. Some are familiar but most are not. The gold star mothers wear their white proudly. They want to be asked about it. They want to explain who they are and why they are there. Those who are unaffiliated and happen to be wearing white today look confused. A cardboard sign on an easel greets us. "Gold Star Mothers, Welcome to the City!" The background is a skyline overlaid with the gold star mother's emblem. We ask the gold star couple in front of us where they are from. Maine. They are hoping to check in quickly and catch a last museum tour for the day. Those who arrive on Thursday, like we did, have more time to explore the area. Once nine am Friday rolls around, time for exploration is limited between tight windows interspersed across the weekend.

After checking in, we drop off our things, and perform the obligatory hotel investigation of the AC, mini fridge, and tv. After a quick scan of the itinerary, we head back out to socialize. We check in with the local chapter, crammed into a hotel room

ready to add the journals to each of the complimentary totes. These are sparkling white bags with the gold star mothers logo printed in gold. In each tote contains the journal, brochures for local attractions, a folder with information about the convention, possibly some bracelets or pins from sponsor organizations, and occasionally some treats. I offer to help stuff the bags but they decline with smiles and the organized flurry continues.

Thursdays are the unofficial start to the convention. It is when members of the national board, local chapter, and those early birds wishing to leisurely explore the city arrive. Members who are instrumental in planning the convention, like the National President, may arrive earlier in the week to ensure set up and put out proverbial fires. For example, in the first "post pandemic" convention, it was the national president who discovered the air conditioning on the conference floor was out. It was that same gold star mother who contacted a local mover and shaker in the city to ensure the hotel ac issue was resolved before other mothers arrived.

The Gold Star Mothers convention is a taxing emotional rollercoaster. It is part informal and uncertified therapy, vacation, and business. Emotions can run high as the convention weaves between laughter, friendship, bereavement, grief, remembering, crying, business meetings, dress clothes, Robert's rules of order, old business, new business, installations, fancy dinners, tourist attractions, memorials, and back to memories. There's music, food, and stories to be told. There are closed door meetings, agendas, assigned seating, and a gavel to be wielded. Emotion work is a necessity with participants needing to swiftly switch their emotive performance to the appropriate emotion for the setting and for the particular moments in each setting (Hochschild 1983).

In this space, family, motherhood, emotion and corporate business partake in a complex contra dance.

A contra dance is a group dance guided by counts, often seen portrayed in films set in the 18th century or showcased during a "ball" scene. One notable example would be during the private ball in the 2005 movie, "Pride and Prejudice" based off the Jane Austen novel of the same name. In the scene, Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy have a tense conversation whilst participating in a contra dance. Twirling lightly on their feet, often switching hands and partners, depending on the group synchronicity, dancers are together yet alone, hands briefly touching before the dance pulls them away. They manage emotions – love, disgust, anger, pride, prejudice – while maintaining the necessary decorum of the space. They follow the steps and switch between different partners, acknowledging their presence. Their hands briefly clasp at the end though it is clear that both still feel tense and alone in this moment. For grieving mothers, hugs may be given, stories shared, but by the end of the convention, the grief is still their own.

The convention as contra dance occurs on at least two levels. On the first, we pan into the individual in the dance. She, greets her partner – the business and grief of GSMO. They step towards one another, then back. They sweep around other dancers – tourism, events, meetings, politics, lunch, and entertainment – before meeting their partner again. They dance in grief and call it service. Stepping forward again and then back. Turning a separate direction to new partners, they gently step around volunteer actions, selfies, and touring military hospitals and United Service Organizations (USO). They continue the dance, mingling with the different players before meeting with their

partner again at the music's end. A bow. The convention convenes. They step away, carrying only their experience with them.

The second way we see the convention as a contra dance is through panning out and looking at the full cast. Instead of there being only one mother and personified factions as dancers, we have all the mothers as dancers. Perhaps their opposing partners are personified events, expectations, business, and emotion. But the mothers themselves are a collection of dancers. They work together, gliding their way across the floor, creating a beautiful work of art. They stay on count. They twirl around each other at times. Together, they are one dance. They bond through the music, hooked to their collective consciousness (Durkheim 1952; Smith 2014) and breathing in the collective effervescence (Durkheim 1912) increasing the emotional bonds (Dunbar, 2006; Dunbar and Lycett, 2005). When the song ends and the applause ceases, each dancer – each mother – walks away only with their experience. Perhaps their partner smelled. Maybe their partner was too tall or too short. A mother leaves an event, "It is too sad", she whispers to another on her way out. She ends her participation in the dance only to rejoin later when the tempo changes. A mother may direct their focus on a different partner. There are similarities to the experiences, true, but enough difference and background to ensure that each had their own unique interpretation of the convention. The dance represents the social emotional experience of the convention, the organizational embeddedness of how to think, interpret, and categorize one another, and the private felt emotional experience of the individuals. For now, we follow the dance, viewing it from the ethnographic notes and the memories of my own interpretive mind.

Day Two: Friday - Symbols

On Friday's they wear red. When I talk about the gold star mother's dress code, I often highlight the white – white clothes, white shoes, sometimes even the white hair. The symbols of the whiteness represent the purity and sanctity of motherhood and their supreme loss. Imbedded in the white is the gold, the pops of color from their ribbons, the shine of their pins, and the faces on their necklaces and dog tags. I sometimes forget that on Fridays they substitute the white blouses for red. RED: Remember Everyone Deployed. Even outside of the convention, the RED slogan is pasted regularly on their organizational social media sites. This is meant to be a yearlong act of acknowledgement that the United States still has troops deployed in hostile areas. Wearing red recognizes service members continued risk of combat related injury, capture, and death. While it is seemingly rare today, a glance at the recent casualty reports shows that troops are still dying (DCAS 2021).

The breakfast area is awash with red t-shirts and white pants. Mothers and even a few fathers are everywhere. I hear the table next to me discussing a true crime show. "And that's why you never trust the partner!" I watch as two moms make their way through the buffet, one with a brace on their leg. They help each other. One table of moms rise to leave, with the air of peacocks, seemingly wanting people to look their way. They stop moms walking by and greet other moms at surrounding tables before leaving. New moms sit down. First convention moms are trying to find their place, their people. When the Vietnam moms arrive, the room practically stops. There is reverence there. The symbology of dress emphasizes a social hierarchy. If asked about the white or the red, a GSMO mother takes that as an opportunity to share their child's story and perform legacy

work. They also distinguish themselves as separate from others via their clothing. They are the mothers of heroes. As they mingle, one becomes aware of the in-group social hierarchy as well. We start first with those at the top. The Vietnam KIA and MIA moms, referred to in group as simply, "The Vietnam Moms".

The Vietnam Moms – Roles

It was one of the Vietnam moms who helped lobby for the Vietnam Memorial Wall currently on display at the National Mall. Then, GSMO National President Emogene Cupp was instrumental in the creation of the monument, bringing a "personal and emotional side of the healing story" (vvmf 2021) that the Vietnam Memorial Wall was to bring. Participating in grief in politics, Cupp, attended meetings in Washington, DC and appeared before Congress advocating for the effort (vvmf 2019). It was Vietnam moms and Korean moms who saw the organization shift through the decades after stagnating in the years post World War II. The Vietnam moms were the ones left to greet the Desert Storm moms, the Iraq moms, the Afghanistan moms and so on. They are said to still rely more on protocol. In my first convention, there were a handful of Vietnam moms, including Past National President Emogene Cupp. They milled and mingled about. Like celebrities at a convention, they were easy to pick out in a crowd and one wanted to see them all. As the years continued, the moms began to dwindle even more. I suspect they had been in a continued decline long before my first convention. Health and age were wearing at them. They had spent decades participating in this organization, some having served as national president more than once.

At my second convention, we picked up two of these moms from the airport. While a little hard of hearing, they were funny and vibrant. They picked at each other a

little and asked questions about the convention so far and the hotel. By my third convention, only three of the Vietnam moms were still around. Two, the two I picked up from the airport the year before, held court. Like royalty, people came to them, seeking advice, encouragement, or just to greet them. They served as role models for others, setting precedence for how others come to make sense of their own statuses as gold star mothers. For one excursion, the entire bus line was held up waiting on these moms to board first. They shuffled by with smiles, chuckles, and polite dismissal. "No, go on. It's fine. You deserve to get on first. Go ahead," said some of the crowd.

As KIA and MIA moms, from the Vietnam era, who served as past national presidents, who were still making annual convention pilgrimages well into their 90's, these mothers were the pinnacle of the organization's social hierarchy of honor and deservingness. I describe in more detail the hierarchy based on type of mother and manner of death later. For now, the significance is that their children died in battle or became missing while on mission. They are allowed the KIA pin. There is no contesting of their belonging in the organization. They are seen as having weathered the loss of child, the stigma surrounding Vietnam, and served locally and nationally throughout the decades. They model how to perform legacy work through their service and the actions they committed in their children's names.

One Vietnam mom flies under the radar. During a group picture, the photographer asks for the Vietnam moms to sit in the front center. The two mentioned above sit down and smile. "There's one more" says the photographer. "No, she's not here this year." One of the two responds assuming he is talking about a friend. "I know. There's still one more." The mothers look around, confused. Ruth moves forward and motions that she

doesn't have to sit up front. One of the mothers from her chapter encourages her to anyway. The photographer insists. Ruth takes her place in the center.

It is important to note that Ruth was a late comer to the organization. Unlike some of the other Vietnam Moms, Ruth did not hear about the GSMO until decades after she became a gold star mother. Living in Nashville in the mid aughts, Ruth first heard about the convention and subsequently the organization from the news. "That sounds like me." So she decided to check it out. She wandered into the hotel lobby not sure where to go or what to do. She has been a member ever since. You may recall part of Ruth's story from chapter four. It is one that is fascinating, encouraging, and also demonstrates the longevity of grief, remembrance, and love. Ruth's story also demonstrates how knowledge of the organization has its hiccups. Eligible mothers get left out and fall through the cracks even today. I have participants who did not hear about the organization for years after their child's death, some who heard on accident, and some who had to search for it themselves.

I bring up Ruth here because while she is one of the elusive Vietnam Moms, Ruth was never, in my convention experience, one to hold court. She was always separated from the other Vietnam Moms, to the point of almost missing pictures and not being recognized by at least one other Vietnam mother. Yet, Ruth makes a tremendous impact on those who do know her. Her presence shows how one does not have to be a social peacock or symbolic royalty to make a difference. While those people are often leaders, former leaders, and the face of the organization, they alone are not the heartbeat of it. Like any community, there are official roles for those who want them. There are also tacit roles for everyone there, whether they realize it or not.

Older mothers serve as role models for living with the grief. While they refer to themselves as a veterans service organization, their membership and activities tacitly function as a bereavement group. Through shared stories, emotions, bonds, and the sociality of the organization, members may learn additional coping skills, how to find hope through meaning making, and benefit from a normalization of grief reactions (Maas et al. 2020). Without just one of them in attendance, the convention itself would be different. A different story told, a different person stuck on the elevator, perhaps nobody to hand Ellen the coffee or to hold Annette's hand. The ceremonial circle of grief becomes short a link. A new rose is placed in the vase. The dance would have to adjust.

The First Ceremony – Constructing Environment

"What time do we have to be there?" "9:30 is the welcome. Then workshops until noon." The early bird registrants gather into the hotel conference room. They use indoor voices as they mill about, stopping by informational booths and finding a seat for the welcome address. At the booths, one might speak to women from the Library of Congress collecting testimonials for the Veterans History Project which now allows gold star families to record their stories. A couple from Maine operate a program called, "Wreathes Across America", which recruits gold star families and veterans to caravan across the east coast from Maine to Arlington Cemetery, laying wreaths on service members' and veterans' graves and educating the public on service member loss – thus operating as agents of patriotic discursive distribution. One might continue down the booths and learn about the "Quilt of Valor", "Working Dogs for Vets", and the "Woody Williams Foundation". They might even stumble upon my booth as a researcher, picking up flyers for my study and chatting with me.

Standing here, it is mostly pleasantries that are exchanged. One or two booths might accept donations for a special project, but on the whole, these are not mercantile stations. The information, pins, pens, bracelets, and brochures are freely given. Mothers mingle but also share stories. A new mother might tear up as she takes everything in. Gossip occurs. Frictions between more tenured members exist. On one occasion, an altercation occurred in front of the booths between at least two mothers, upsetting one to the point where she was rumored to have left the convention all together. The tension sizzled in the air. In emotionally expressive sites, one must be ready for anything.

Once the meeting starts, we all move toward the front to find our seats. The national president says a few welcoming words, hoping people found their way smoothly, and will enjoy the convention. Sometimes, honored guests are brought up to say a few words. In the post-pandemic convention, the governor of the State addressed the crowd of mothers. He attended with his wife, aides, security, and a camera crew, participating in the politics of grief. He thanked the mothers for their sacrifice and invited them to enjoy the state and city they were in. He and his wife later met with mothers, took selfies with those who wanted it, and participated in the convention's scheduled service project – packing duffle bags for the local VA hospital.

Workshops follow the welcome. Generally, they are short presentations from those behind the booths. Wreathes Across America describes their mission and encourages people to volunteer. The Library of Congress follows suit. Quilts of Valor may be given. During my first year as a researcher there, I spoke to the crowd about my research, introducing myself as a researcher, how I came to choose this topic, and describing what the interview process would be like. I even showed a picture of myself

and my chiweenie dog sitting across from the microphone and computer screen to show them what a virtual interview looks like on my end. These were pre-pandemic and pre-zoom times and I wanted to humanize the long distance interview.

Anyone who has been to a conference can easily imagine how these workshops go. We take turns giving our talks. Afterwards, there's a polite applause followed by mingling as people make their way out to lunch. During this time, more mothers are arriving. Others are picking people up from airports and meeting one another for coffee or food. People are checking into rooms and greeting familiar faces. This is generally a low key time to reconnect with one another and forge that bond that will be described throughout the weekend.

The Welcome Entertainment – Setting Tone

Tones shift throughout the environment. They order expected emotional expression. Cultivating the appropriate tone can ensure that an event goes smoothly. Breaches in that tone may cause disruption and even go so far as to jeopardize the authenticity of the organization as described in some unexpected moments later in this manuscript. Overall, the tone is one of reverence to the country, to the fallen, and to the families. It is one that emphasizes honor, valor, and patriotism. This is reiterated sometimes explicitly throughout each of the organized events.

It is evening now and time for some scheduled entertainment. We arrive late to the smaller hotel banquet room. There are looming palm trees made of fruit. Shoulder to shoulder, we are crammed together in this space with mothers trying to find a place to sit and be heard. Some expected dinner here and were disappointedly grabbing up as many grapes as they could to tide them over. Some of the moms have changed clothes. Others

have pre-gamed with alcoholic beverages, taking advantage of the vacation aspect of this as much as possible. We finally squeeze our way through the crowd to sit with other gold star mothers and fathers. The gold star fathers are few and far between but those who attend can either be found with their wives or with other gold star fathers. The president projects over the loudness of the crowd and introduces the entertainment. It is a Polynesian dance school. Music and drums blare over invisible speakers. The crowd cheers as children line through the tables, shaking their skirts and moving their arms expertly in traditional dance. The teacher explains the meanings to some of the dances. “I can’t see.” “Then stand up.” The crowd shifts and stretches their necks to witness this show. “Look at them go!”, “I’m getting tired just watching them.” “She looks like my granddaughter.”

This event serves a few functions. 1) It sets the tone that this will be a fun convention and breaks some ice. Going in, moms may wear their grief close to their hearts, literally and figuratively. There may be tension and nerves. But here, in this setting, at this event, the accosted senses force one to be in the moment. In a therapeutic lens, it may be interpreted that there are still new things to see and life to live. 2) It shares some of the local culture and attempts to entice spectators out of the hotel and to explore the local area. In order to have a convention, one generally needs donors. Spending money in the local area and good PR are two ways to entice donors. Besides, what would be the point in having the convention in a large metro if one didn’t get out and explore a little? 3) It provides a [hopefully] positive shared experience. Gold star mothers speak of the common bond they share through the loss of their sons and daughters. This event gives them another shared experience and an alternative talking point. Even if it is mildly

negative, such as complaints over lack of food or space, the group still has that knowledge and experience to converse over.

The welcome entertainment is usually lively. It is a celebration of the attendees as gold star families. The convention itself exists on the belief that Gold Star Mothers are special, worthy of honor and their children deserving of valor. The gratitude of the event performers support this, often verbally as they or a host thank the mothers for their sacrifice and mention the honor it is to perform for this particular crowd. The red, white, and blue signs in the hotel lobby, the patriotic organizations behind the booths and workshops, and the color scheme of the welcome entertainment all serve as ways of promoting patriotic discourses. They also connect feelings of friendship, commonality, bonding, and joy among those who know grief to this gold star "family" and the values it holds. The event, and convention as a whole, also offers narratives of a larger purpose towards their loss, provides meaning making tools to story or re-story gold star identities, models of legacy work, and reassigns death as a good death in terms of coding it as a willing sacrifice for a greater cause. As we see in chapter seven, this blanket of a good death does become contested in particular events throughout the convention. But, as shown in chapter eight, it is brought back to the commonality of loss, purpose, and "goodness" of death by the final banquet.

The emotionally expressive environment is one that relies on participant agreement, vulnerability, and trust. This event signals this through positioning the convention as a space where mothers can form connections, open up, understand and be understood, and allow themselves to experience and express a range of emotions with others who know the significance of the loss of a child. The intergenerational presence

inspires and models ways of sense making and legacy construction. The opening entertainment helps attendees feel part of the community through the direct collective effervescence and through the talking points they will have afterwards.

Failure at this event might also set an unwelcome tone. This is the first main point of the weekend designed to strengthen the collective atmosphere that the convention and organization both hinge on. One might argue that it is the first act in an organizational presentation of self. Without this sense of commonality, or the feeling of community and, "sisterhood" as participants often described it, the organization risks losing its focus, membership, and stated purpose. If the groups identity is based on its interactional performance (Brekhus 2020) then a failed performance jeopardizes its authenticity. This risk was alluded to by an interview participant who described almost stepping away from the organization after an incident during a business meeting.

> The first convention I went to was a sad one in that they were raking the treasurer over the coals. I almost dropped membership after that. She didn't have an answer to a question and they were raking her over. I get that maybe she didn't do the best job but she was a volunteer and a gold star mom. It was in the meeting when she gave her financial report. She didn't have the answers. I did find out recently that she has had health issues. She was in tears. It was sad. I know they wanted answers but for my first convention, that was hard for me to see that they would treat someone like that.

Every event matters. A breach in the emotional order and event expectations can result in members questioning the values, truth, and authenticity of the organization. The first entertainment and the later welcome event attempt to mitigate this risk by laying the overarching tone. Emotions, tensions, and drama do occur but it is important to set a tone of organizational order, trust, and connectivity in order to maintain membership and ensure a successful convention.

Chapter Conclusion

Surviving the convention requires emotional endurance for each attendee. The organization also relies on emotional regulation and a type of organizational emotion work. As we see in the events to come, ceremonies, slide shows, music, and stories are used to evoke or suppress the group's overall emotional agreement based on the setting and tone. Breaking feeling rules (Hochschilds 1969) can risk the organization's authenticity and order. For example, the first entertainment event requests a jovial, joyous, and open environment, while the memorial service expects a more solemn and demur tone.

Elder generations of mothers and those who have been members longer take on a role of mentor and role model. They help ease members in, demonstrate community over time, and serve as living organizational history. Emogene Cupp was vital to the success of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall and 39 years later the organization continues the practice of placing a ceremonial wreath at the wall every September during Gold Star Families Weekend.

New comers quickly become aware of symbolism at the convention. Passersby cast questioning glances at the sea of white clad women. Their lapel pins, ribbons, badges, gold jewelry, and dog tags sparkle in the light, drawing attention. Gold Star Mothers are separated from everyone else in dress and appearance. Upon close glance, they experience in-group separation by additional symbols and shades of white. Those with the purple backed pin or KIA pin wear their child's death manner on their chest. The lapel pin literally marking the wearer's status in the hierarchy. A white's swap is sometimes established so that those who need more white clothing may take some that

has been donated. However, white clothes dinge with age and wear, communicating potential class implications. These in group differences are discussed more in chapter seven. It is a challenge for convention organizers to manage these hierarchical differences, status symbols, and generational differences while cultivating a collective bond through shared purpose.

The national convention serves as a discursive environment – that is a specific setting permeated with institutional discourse where one constructs and reconstructs their social self (Gubrium and Holstein 2000; Miller 1994). It is, a going concern (Hughes 1984) between identity membership, national discourse of motherhood and patriotism, and of individual relationships within the group. Here, the organization provides a physical setting and continuous interaction where mothers may construct their self as gold star mother. In a Foucaultian (1979) sense, these discourses set working templates for further construction. Older mothers serve as existing templates and organizational discourses transfer into examples of how to frame themselves as a gold star mother and a GSMO member. The music has started and the contra dance has begun.

CHAPTER SEVEN: IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION THROUGH MARKING AND BELONGING

Attending the convention and learning the language of members is a feat. Language is powerful and at times promotes exclusion and othering. In this chapter, we look at how language and discourse are used to socially mark belonging and deservingness of mothers at the convention. Brekhus (1996) describes social marking as a means of narratively distinguishing the mundane or ordinary from the perverse or extraordinary. It is a way of distinction among those with noteworthy characteristics or behavior.

The old riddle that goes along with this is of the doctor refusing to operate on their son. I was around five when my mother first posed the riddle to me. "A boy and his father are in a car coming back from a game. They get into a wreck and the father is killed. The boy is wheeled into the operating room. The attending surgeon says, 'I can't operate on this boy. He's my son.' Who is the surgeon?" The riddle is meant to stump the audience. The mundane and expected identity of doctors is that of males. That the mother might possibly be the surgeon is something outside of the norm and must be marked. A female doctor. A male nurse. The variety of marked characteristics and marked identities in the world are too numerous to name. For gold star mothers, their very title is a marked identity.

Marking and Deservingness

Being gold star adds a shiny label to their identity as mother. While not desired the title of Gold Star Mother distinguishes the mother from other mothers. A gold star itself has long been a symbol of a good job, pride, something admirable. Therefore, a

gold star mother sets a mother apart as exceptional, reproducing narratives of valor and honor for their children's sacrifice. That sacrifice becomes transferred during parts of the convention when a host or speaker will refer to the child's sacrifice as the mother's sacrifice of her own child. Within the organization, that label is further stretched among members with additional markings added. "Vietnam Moms", "Korea Moms", "KIA Moms", "National board", "Past National President" are all marked as exceptional. On the opposite end, "suicide moms" are marked as less desirable and their status as a gold star mother is often contested. Through the marked identity of gold star mother and the additional markings ascribed to members, an agreement of deservingness is negotiated. Those with exceptional markings are unquestioned in their deservingness and belonging to the group. According to Battle (2017) we designate some groups as more deserving than others.

Battle found socio-cognitive patterns of family and deservingness along a continuum of said deservingness. Where deservingness of social benefits, acceptance, and welfare are on one end, un-deservingness and stigma make up the opposite end. Those who were single or cohabitating adults in poverty were placed as undeserving and often viewed as immoral. Moving the scale a little, children are often designated an automatic deserving status that can transfer to the parents based on the parent's role to the child. A person who becomes a mother may be eligible for benefits because she is a mother to a child. Within this, types of mothering and familial situations may slide one closer to the deserving end or back toward the undeserving end. Widows are typically viewed as more deserving than mothers who conceived out of wedlock. Among widows, one who lost their husband to gang related drive-bys may see a transference of her

husband's perceived immorality and slide toward the stigmatized end. Contrastingly, war widows may see a transference of their spouse's honor and valor and will slide toward the deserving end. War widows are often viewed through a patriotic lens as having performed her duty to the nation by supporting her spouse's service and facing life without him due to his sacrifice. Expanding this to mothers and honor, gold star mothers are automatically placed near the deserving end and closer to the mark than say mothers of drive by victims.

Similar to war widows, gold star mothers receive a transfer of their child's sacrifice and honor and the mother's own. Within this group, further striations occur. Those who are KIA moms are edged even closer to the deservingness end while suicide moms are pushed in the direction of the undeserving end. Other moms make up the middle between the two in this stacked continuum set. Of KIA moms, biological moms have preference over foster, step mothers, surrogate. GSMO moms also gain status and movement on the continuum based on the leadership and participation in the organization and in their local communities. This participation typically requires time, financial resources, and cultural capital, therefore there are some class based privileges evident. For example, those on the national board are required to travel to the headquarters in DC several times a year, meet with military and government leaders, and organize national scale events. As I am editing, the current national board is presenting a wreath at the French Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Paris for the 100th anniversary.

For gold star mothers, this deservingness is put on display through the visible symbols they wear – leadership badges, lapel pins determining manner of death, colors denoting their purity and sacrifice, the symbols they visit – monuments and memorials

which reinforce heroism and valor as something worth recognizing, treasuring, honoring. This is also shaped by how they make sense of their own titles, encourage and promote patriotism through media, public relations, events, and community speaking engagements, and through the legacy work they perform for their deceased children. Through marking and deservingness, we gain more nuance into how gold star mothers, primarily GSMO members make sense of their identity and experiences.

Day Three: The Official Opening of the Convention – High Ceremony

It's morning again and I am at my research information booth. Moms are slowly filtering into the conference room. One mother speaks with me about "shared military family bereavement". Another is a first time page who admits to being nervous while adjusting her outfit. She is dressed in a white blouse, a white skirt falling below the knee, white gloves, and a white hat lined in gold embroidery with a gold threaded star on the front, red ribbons and pins. I notice the other pins and bobbles worn by other moms around me and ask the page about them. Purple pins for those whose children were killed in action. Gold is for those who died in other fashions. Some pins indicate past national board service, department service, and local chapter service. Some pins reflect their affiliated military branch and other's memorialize their children. Board members wear gold name tags with their positions listed. Buttons, dog tags, and necklaces are worn with names and/or pictures of their fallen. Their entire attire is symbolic. Convention name tags are white and gold. White of a mother's pure love and service for her children, memorabilia in tribute to the child whose name she clings to, and insignia of group membership and organizational leadership. The gold star mothers in this room wear their

motherhood, their service, their emotions, their group connections and their membership rank on their chest.

Another mother approaches and picks up one of my cards. We chat about her surviving family. She has a grandchild who graduated from my school. More people file in and the hum grows. Who should sit where? Those of us at our booths decide to continue standing at the back to allow space for the mothers. Several of the dads and guests stand as well. The business meeting will immediately follow and the mothers sit in loosely assigned sections.

It's time. The national board enters, cloaked in formality and reverence. There's the historian, the page, the Veterans Service Officer, the Americanism Chair, National Service Officer, Treasurer, the Secretary, the First and Second Vice chairs, the National President, the Chaplain. All are dressed in white dress clothes, no shorts allowed, and pins. They stand gracefully behind a long table facing the crowd. The color guard and honor guard follow, carrying the American flag and the Gold Star Mother Flag to either side of the national board. The chaplain produces a black banner in recognition of mothers no longer present. A prayer is said for peace and harmony over the meetings. The Americanism chair calls for all to stand for the pledge of allegiance. Hands over hearts, the crowd recites the words with a mixture of sacred reverence of a proud mother and the robotic voice of a high school English class. Through this action, they signify their allegiance to their nation and honor the principles they believe their children ultimately died for. Within their events, discourses of honor and patriotism are reinforced.

Members remain standing as the flags are officially posted and adjusted. Members are then allowed to be seated and the Madame Color Guard and Madame Honor Guard are dismissed. The slightest shuffle of the feet, zipping of a bag, or clicking of a pen would draw attention at this point. Madame First Vice President is called to read the organization's preamble. Madame Second Vice reads the mission statement. The National President stands. "Thank you Madame First Vice and Madame Second Vice. I now declare the 81st National Convention now open!" Applause.

The Business Meeting and Contentions

At this point, dads and guests are officially asked to leave. Two things are about to occur. One, the mothers will have a closed door meeting that nobody else is allowed to witness. Two, the dads and guests are sent away from the hotel on a guided tour and lunch. The design keeps them away the full time of the Mothers' daylong meeting. This is important because a large part of the convention is the business meeting. It is there that they vote on resolutions, make changes within the organization, and decide on the new leadership. I was ushered out of the meeting, despite having permission from the president one year to quietly listen from the back. While I do not have firsthand experience there, I have spoken with participants who have attended.

According to participants, the business meeting is often contentious. One woman was asked to leave because her shorts were not considered appropriate attire. In another session, a mother was visibly and aggressively angry that a particular issue would not be covered until a later date. One participant in a later interview described the business meetings as, "hostile". When asked what she meant, she explained, "Heated discussions." "But nobody has ever come to blows?" – I asked. "No, no, no. They would never allow

that to happen. The Sergeant at Arms is the one who is supposed to keep order." At the post-pandemic convention, a member did lay hands and attempt to remove the gavel from the organization's President. The board is challenged here with tone setting in the emotionally expressive environment. The beginning ceremony and Robert's rules of order is meant to set the tone of rational decision making and business etiquette couched in a patriotic reverence. However, the topics of belongingness, those relating to a child's legacy, and those relating to the identity of the organization and its members can evoke emotional actions.

> There have been some people who have expressed their opinions very vocally. One thing they have argued about [in a previous year] was if your child was in the national guard and they died when they got out, if they were on leave or not called up and died, then should the mother be allowed to be a gold star mother? In my opinion, absolutely.

The quote above speaks some to the gate keeping of organizational and personal identity. Those who are national guard moms are positioned lower on the deservingness continuum and are hearing arguments for their exclusion from this continuum subset of gold star mothers. Those who are arguing for the exclusion are attempting to gatekeep the membership and deservingness, further separating themselves from others on the continuum. Membership criteria and group legitimacy may cause heated discussions with some seeking to preserve group exclusivity. Tensions may be felt over group focus when it comes to partnering with organizations and fundraisers. Nominations and elections also create drama when one who thought they had the votes feels betrayed. It is in this place of business, motherhood, and membership where identities and belonging are contested. Because of this, the emotional tone is in constant negotiation and the degree of expression may be extreme.

A common theme heard even before beginning this research was "who counts?" Who counts as a member? How is motherhood verified? What types of mothers count? What types of deaths count? In other words, what is the organizational and individual definition of the situations in terms of motherhood status and death category of the child? Schutz (1970) argues that people are classified by recognizable groups. For gold star mothers and members of the GSMO, mothers are often typified in a few of ways – board position, cohort, type of mother, and type of death experienced. These classifications factor into how mothers construct their identities and how members of the group construct belonging. In conversations with participants, these classifications are factored into the conversation as social markers of legitimacy within the organization. Referring to the National Guard debate above, a participant elaborated on the argument.

> Those guys are on call. They sign up to be that. Then there are those who say, 'actually…' but those are the same [who only want KIA included]. I would probably call those, 'purists.' They believe the only ones who should be gold star mothers are those whose children died in combat and they don't like that it got changed.

For gold star mothers, social marking is done every day between in-group and out-group mothers. Some of the colors and symbols are off putting for non-member gold star mothers. "They look like a sorority with all of their white, and rules about you can wear this but not that, and I don't want that." – Jeri-Anne. Regardless of organizational membership, badges are worn and license plates proudly display their gold star status. Gold star families qualify for gold star license plates with permanent tags, meaning they never have to renew their plate or tags. This is a national benefit associated with their deservingness. Drive by moms do not automatically receive car tags. With this marking comes honor and privilege for the community and nation as well as a sense of discomfort

or even stigma in talking about the mother's lived realities in loss. Honor is thrust upon gold star mothers during burial parades, patriotic events, and political spotlight. Discomfort and stigma are experienced when a listener avoids speaking about the mother's deceased child – matter out of place – or attempts to enforce feeling rules on the mother's grief in an attempt to hold her accountable to social narratives of motherhood and grief. Participants exemplified that latter through family members and friends refusal to talk about the mother's deceased child and the expectations that the mother would, "just get over it" or "move on" at a certain point. GSMs will tell you that there is no point where one is over the death of their child. The best they can do is learn to breathe within it.

GSMs members use marking to distinguish status in two main ways. Members draw on death stories as markers of deservingness in terms of legal and monetary benefits, organizational membership, tangible symbols of honor, and status among members. The first is a polemical bar of marked identity (Brekhus 1996). This layer is a contrast between the loss of someone in the military versus the loss of someone not in the military. Those who died in the military or from military related activities are described as being more valorous and honorable, while others were not as honorable. To be clear, mothers do not argue that other deaths are dishonorable. Non-military deaths just are. They are sad. They are tragic. But they are not on the same level of valor as military ones. They do position military related, active duty deaths on a pedestal compared to others. The second layer is the manner of death as reported and storied by the mother. This layer forms more of a continuum between the exceptional gold star mothers of service members killed in action and the contested gold star mothers of suicide victims,

with all others dispersed in a middle space. If we consider our continuum sets and subsets of deservingness as more akin to plot points on a map, this second layer not only positions their child's death on a map of valor, but directly impacts the mother's identity as a gold star mother.

Part of the ascribed identity of gold star mothers is the belief that their child died valorously. This is the case whether they were killed in action, accident, sickness, or suicide. Their agreeance to serve their country and die as a result of it gives their children a level of honor and bravery that directly factors into the mother's legacy work. As identity is repositioned in each of these different subsets, mother's identity is reshaped and the legacy they create is reshaped. On a map of valor is their child's death plotted by its own continuums. From there, the mother makes sense of her identity and plots it. It may be accepted or contested from others in group, in which case it may be replotted or a separate plot may occur. As the mother continues the legacy work and the identity work, as she takes on different roles, and ages in the organization, and as organizational and national criteria change, plots are adjusted and added. It becomes an identity map organized around valor and deservingness in relation to their role as mothers.

Full membership is relegated to mothers, though fathers and siblings may be associate members. Within this organization, contentious debates attempt to pick apart who should "count" as an official gold star mother. Do suicide moms count? Should noncombat related deaths be included? Where do foster moms fit in? What about step moms? Should the definition of gold star mothers be expanded? Would it be best to stick to the department of defense guidelines? We can categorize these questions and points of contestation of membership into two main themes: Type of Death and Type of Mother.

Marking Type of Death

When asked about who counted as a member of GSMO, participants typically divided into two camps. The first and smaller camp believed the criteria needed to be strict and that too many mothers were being included, denigrating the exclusivity of the organization. Some passionately exclaim that there is a difference between those who lost a child in action versus those whose son, "… just had a heart attack. I mean, come on. Anyone can have a heart attack." – Susan - quoted but sentiment shared by others. At least one participant referred to this camp as purists, and that is what I consider them now. The purists hold to the sacredness of being a KIA mom, and believe including noncombatant deaths dilutes the title of GSMO.

> My son gave his life on a battlefield in a foreign country, with his brothers in hand and someone else's son comes home and drives a motorcycle down the road at a million miles an hour and now they are a Gold Star Mothers Organization Mom? No. I'm sorry. I think too much is based on PTSD. I hate that quote as well. I think some come home and find their wife cheated on them or something, you know. One friend of mine, her son came home and took a friend's life, and then his [life], and they are gold star. How can you be gold star? – Holly

In the quote above, the mother orientates herself in the marked identity of gold star mother and in the exceptional end of the membership pool. She is a KIA mom and describes her son's sacrifice as something separate and more deserving of the honor associated with gold star. Her placement on the shiny end of the continuum is contrasted with those who are made gold star members by other means. For purists, the manner of their child's death is factored into the conversation as social markers of legitimacy within the organization.

> And you know, there's been some dissent among the ranks at different times and its even gotten hostile at conventions sometimes when we talk about changing things. Some people still think that your child should have

> died in combat. They don't like the idea that your child just died in service; They don't get to be a gold star mother. My feeling has always been, what difference does it make? It doesn't take anything away from your child.

Social marking delineates marked identity characteristics from unmarked (Brekhus 1996). Marking is done every day between in-group and out-group – that is gold star families and those who are not. Marking situates one as normal or mundane, abnormal, or exceptional. Gold star mothers use marking in constructing group identity and group belonging.

> One year this lady was there, she and her two daughters, and they were talking out loud about that. I know they were talking about me because I was the only one sitting there. I actually cried. They were like, 'Well, she's not really a gold star mother.' I just don't get that. It doesn't take anything away from your child. It isn't his fault he didn't die in combat.

Thinking of it as a continuum or three part bar, wherein one side is the epitome of a gold star mother, in the middle exists a contested gold star mother identity, and at the end not a gold star mother, those who are American moms of those killed in action (KIA) exist at the epitome. Near the opposite end are those who have a contested identity as a gold star mom, those who lost their children to PTSD induced suicide. In-between the two contrasts are the other moms who are legitimately and solidly gold star mothers by means besides KIA and suicide according to both the Department of Defense and GSMO. The closer toward that KIA end the higher the status. When asked why, one purist participant explained, "[What do you think the difference is with KIA] –

> I think it is honorable. They volunteered. None of them were drafted. These kids all knew what they were getting into. They loved their country. They were proud. They wanted to serve their country and protect their country. I think it is very honorable and courageous to sign on that line and step up.

The closer to the suicide end, the more contested their identity claim is. Mothers of soldiers killed in action (KIA) wear different pins, socially marking their status as "KIA Moms", and may find their son's names on more memorials than those who died in car crashes, heart attacks, and various other ways. For some, the badges themselves are a point of tension. "In my opinion, this is pretty controversial, I don't think they should have made a difference in the pins. I think that is one thing that perpetuated the controversy. Those whose children died in combat already got the purple heart for their child. I don't think it was necessary that they also got a purple pin. It sets us apart. It fuels the fire for this thing that's been going on ever since I got in. "

Those who lost their children to suicide face possible rejection because of the legal barriers in determining motive behind the suicide (was this combat related or not) and are socially marked in a contested position. Mothers of suicide may face more guilt than other types of mothers (Miles and Demi 1992). They face more contestation at conventions and are more likely to be left out of events. However, the organization in recent years has taken on the cause of veteran suicide by donating to Working Dogs for Vets – a service dog organization for returned service members, and by hosting the 2.2 mile walk for suicide awareness and prevention. Still, the inclusion of mothers of suicide victims are debated at national and local levels.

Between the events of September 11, 2001 to May 2021, there have been 30,177 service members and veterans who served post 9/11 that have died by suicide, far more than KIA deaths during the same time frame (U.S. Department of Defense 2021). Suitt (2021) describes one unit where 9 service members were killed in action and 15 returned soldiers from the same unit died by suicide. Post 9/11 veterans only make up 21% of U.S.

Veterans (Suitt 2021; Vespa 2020). When including veteran suicide from those who served before 9/11, the number jumps to over 89,000 between 2005 and 2018 (Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention 2020; Suitt 2021). The estimate in September 2021 is now projected to be at least 95,000 since 2005. Suitt posits that multiple deployments, increased PTSD, and increased Traumatic Brain Injuries (TBI) may contribute to the rise in veteran and service member suicide. It is estimated that at least 20% of those who served experienced at least one TBI from combat. Despite the prevalence, "suicide moms" as they are often referred to at GSMO are rare in attendance and contested in gold star identity.

> Do you know [redacted]? Her son died in a training accident and we have become pretty good friends. We always talk about how there's a hierarchy. If your child died in combat then you're more important than one whose child died in a training mission. She used to say she and I were on the same level. I said, actually, we are not. The people whose children died in combat are on top. Then come the ones who died in a training mission. Then come the ones who died by other manner. Then come the ones whose children took their own life. It is not a spoken thing. Nobody would say that's the way it is but if you've been in this group long enough you understand that's the way it is. We should be building each other up and not tearing each other down. - Grace

Grace directly states the organizational hierarchy in terms of manner of death. She follows this up with a value critique of the organization and members. For a group that claims to be a family, a sisterhood, and to share an unbreakable common bond, Grace notes that they strain that cohesion by maintaining this hierarchy. At a recent convention, the inclusion of suicide moms in the organization was proposed, presented, and voted down.

> You know, the suicide moms, we can't change what the DOD says but we as an organization can embrace them. In the meeting, our chapter actually proposed that we rethink our membership because when the GSMO was started in 1929, it was only KIA. And over time it has included accident

> and MIA. Maybe in my lifetime it will include those by suicide. It was interesting, I kept thinking about that marine who spoke at the memorial. He spoke about his friend (veteran who died by suicide) and all I kept thinking was, his mom could not join our organization. And, maybe over time. One of the Vietnam moms came up to me and said, 'Keep doing it. It is going to take a while. Keep doing it.'

The spectacle of grief occurs even at conventions. During the memorial service, a marine spoke to the crowd. Tears welled when he spoke about loss, including his fellow veteran friend who was one of many to die by suicide. This participant reflected on the irony that while many of the mothers emotionally reacted to the marine's story and expressed so afterwards, they continue to vote for gate keeping policies that would prevent the mother of the veteran's deceased friend from belonging in the organization, preventing her from getting closer to the deservingness and valor end. Their refusal of membership communicates that a child's death was not valorous enough and that the mother is thus not deserving of membership. This may have a latent national function as well. Admitting suicide moms into the organization might cause unwanted national attention on the crisis of suicide moms and may position suicide as a byproduct of war. By limiting membership, mothers maintain the narrative of what a service member is and what counts as a valorous sacrifice worthy of national honor. It also puts the onus of death on the national enemy or fate rather than something the military or government may be doing that fails U.S. service members and veterans. When asked what the main issue with suicide moms is in terms of organizational membership, one participant explained:

> I think in general there is no way to prove that that child committed suicide because they served in the military. Maybe they had a drug problem before or after. The rules are with the DOD. If it is under a certain time after your active duty, and you have been treated by a VA doctor for PTSD or TBI, then [you would be classified as GSM]. Most

> returned people I know, do not go to the VA and if they were in the reserves they are afraid they would be kicked out. So, where do you stop? Six months? 12 months? I'm not sure I would put a time on it. But that's one of the things that came up.

Approximately 20% of participants who were members made claims associated with the purist group. The majority of participants who were members aligned with what I call the inclusionists. Inclusionists argue that a loss is a loss and, "KIA, accident, who cares? Your son has *died*. This isn't a club anyone wants to be in. We shouldn't be excluding people. For what? Because they died in training and not in action? Or what about those who worked in the burn pits? They still died because they were there." – Janet. The main sentiment in this camp is that "This is a club that nobody should want to join." – Sandy – one of many participants who voiced this phrase at some point during their interviews.

> Some of them back then had this notion of the importance of their child's death because it happened in Vietnam or Korea. I remember so distinctly, this one mom who actually said that. I had to tell her, 'He still died. He was in the service. He wasn't in Vietnam but he was still in the service. He didn't enlist to die. Neither did yours. Your son's death is no better than mine. They both died. – Judy

> In our State, there are members who don't like that we allow suicide moms on our Facebook page and they don't want [them] to be members because we allow them in. I allow any mom. If their child died, then they are on our page. If they want to march in our parades and be considered a gold star mom then they are. They just aren't an American Gold Star Mom in our organization.
> – Lucy

Judy pushes against some of the hierarchy and stratification surrounding manner of death and cohort affiliation. For Judy, a child's death should be enough for deservingness. Lucy takes it a step further in allowing suicide moms onto the state's gold

star social media page. Here, she goes against the national norms and criteria of membership to extend an inclusive symbolic hand for those who are seeking belonging.

During the convention, a mother from a state different than the one above called me over to her table in the hotel dining area. “You just missed about five hours’ worth of data.” She said. “Oh?” The mom motions to a near empty table. “There was a debate… about who counts as a gold star mother. The Department of Defense says this. The branch says that. GSMO says another thing.” The debate centered around a suicide mom who was in attendance but not an official member of the organization. A second mom who also happens to be a state/department president adds, “She’s not considered a full member here, but she is in [my] state. I don’t do that [exclude].” Tears swell in the state president’s eyes.

These conversations inevitably make their way to the moms in question. After my convention presentation during the workshops, a mom approached me with tears in her eyes. “I’m not sure if I qualify. Mine wasn’t a “fallen” soldier, but he died in suicide. He was in the Airforce.” While her hesitancy over qualifying was in regards to my study, it likely would not have come up if her identity as a member of the organization and gold star mother were not actively contested. To be clear, mothers of suicide victims may attend the meetings, but they cannot currently count as official members, vote, or attend the business meetings. They are essentially guests unless they have been able to prove that the suicide was in direct relation to service. This would require clinical diagnoses and support from a VA affiliated mental health practitioner that the child was a patient of before death.

As the organization continues to expand its definitions and vote to allow new categories of mothers in, it is likely that fewer purists will voice their position as strongly. A compromise may even occur, as one participant suggested, "If they want to allow everybody in, that's fine. But have groups where the kia moms meet with the kia moms and the suicide moms meet with suicide moms." In the present, belonging is still determined by type of death marking.

Marking Type of Mother

How one is a mother, whether biological, through marriage, foster care, or adoption may impact their membership claims. According to membership guidelines and bylaws, families must have known the child by age 15 to be considered a member of the organization. this prevents spouses, offspring, and some foster and adoptive parents from joining. One participant described knowing of a step mother who had been more involved in the son's life than the mother. She described the balance and contingency in the following way. As long as the two, mother and step mother got along, they were both allowed in. If they were at odds, precedence may be given to the biological mother.

Contestations of type of mother appear rare. Nobody is wearing a badge for being a biological mother or a different color pin if they are an adoptive mother. The contestation is debated more around rare circumstance and informal groups. I heard this first hand during convention weekend. Eating dinner with a group of mothers, the conversation shifted to the role of step mothers and foster mothers. There was an anecdote of somebody one of the mothers knew who was not included because she had been a foster mother – not biological or adoptive. The question was asked whether that mother should count. Through the conversation, cases of step mothers were added in.

Finally, a gold star spouse asked if there weren't clear rules about this. Recognition of the formal criteria seemed to dawn and the conversation was shifted to food. However, the official criteria has shifted even in the years I have been researching the organization. When I first began, the written and published criteria for membership was to have known and been related to the child prior to age five. Meaning, a step mother would have needed to marry into the family and an adoptive mother would have needed to have adopted the child by age five. It later shifted from age five to age fifteen.

> If the government says that this mom is a gold star mom, who am I to question if she's the mom, the step mom, the grandma who raised him, the aunt, if she's Arab, or what have you? If that child marks on his paperwork that this person raised me or this person is my mother, who's my next of kin, then that's how it is. But for some reason, some of these mothers always want to bring membership qualifications up. So that seems to always be an issue at conventions. As far as I'm concerned, those casualty officers come up to your house and present you with this pin, they don't care who you are. Why should I question that. But, because the makeup of a household is so strange in 2018 then I can understand the confusion. To me, it ends with where they go and if I have the paperwork to prove it. Someone will bring it up invariably every year. It is brought up through resolutions for the bylaws. When the state submits a change to the constitution, it is discussed and voted on at convention. It was voted down again this year. [Is it normally the same people]? Pretty much. We aren't supposed to be political but a lot of politics are involved in this stuff.
> – Lindy

Like manner of death, the organization continues to gate keep in terms of relational affiliation. This has direct implications for how the applicant constructs their identity and their resources and models for both coping, and legacy construction. The following story comes from a participant named Jane (pseudonym). Jane and her husband agreed to interview together via phone. While not a member of GSMO, Jane is not immune from the social parameters and marking of what "counts" as a mother.

Jane's Story: Constructing "Mother"

Jane, described becoming the primary custodian for her younger brother during his preteen and teenage years. Jane and her husband treated him as their own child, helped with his homework, drove him to events, loved him as a son, and counseled him on his career path. Being a part of this new military family, the son wanted to follow in the footsteps of Jane's husband, the only father figure the boy knew. The husband and surrogate father deliberated and advised the branch and career path he thought would be safest. After their son's helicopter crashed in the hills in Afghanistan, Jane and her husband were faced with mourning and funeral arrangements. Jane recounted to me the moment that her son's biological mother was presented with both the folded American flag and the Gold Star flag for her son's service, the son she had not seen since a boy, the son Jane raised. If you ask members of the organization, they will remark at how unfortunate it is and pivot to a discussion on the difficulty of receiving accurate information. But, according to their own criteria, Jane would only qualify as an associate member of the organization at best, while the biological mother could apply in full.

In these debates and bureaucratic criteria, organizational members construct who counts as a mother, and whose motherhood status may be higher. Not that any mother would suggest that their loss is better, somehow greater, than another when pressed, but the passion and contention among some suggests at least some perceived hierarchy. The changing nature of gold star families both with the initial disruption and the culmination of living with loss over time, the gendered expectations of grief and mourning (there is not a comparable organization for fathers), interactions with other gold star families and misunderstandings with those unaware of the significance, as well as the organizational

debates on who should be included into membership all yield insight into the key questions. They speak towards the changing meanings and constructions of family, what it means to be mothers and family, how they do mothering, and how they construct family.

Day Three Continues – The Place for Fathers

Belonging for gold star mothers stretches beyond White House invitations and business meetings. In this section, we finish day three of the convention and look at the role of gold star fathers at the convention.

Organized by the president's spouse or another gold star family designee, the dad and guest tour serves to distract from the Mother's business meeting by providing lunch and some sort of tour or entertainment. These couldn't differ more from year to year. On the four tours I've attended, we have driven around military bases, fed Caisson horses – the horses who pull the bodies of the fallen to their burial sites. We've explored WWII aircraft in museums, visited a Fischer House – a house where injured veterans/servicemembers and/or their families may stay while the veteran/soldier is in medical treatment. We have had lunch at fancy restaurants and in the USO cafeteria. One year, we toured the Nixon Presidential library and capped off the afternoon with a quick beer at a local bar. Another year, we simply went to Bass Pro.

The dad and guest tour is typically a laid back and at times more jovial break from the pomp and circumstance of the rest of the convention. It is full of khaki shorts and baseball caps. There is color in the dress here. Conversations still weave in and out regarding loss, but the grief does not appear to linger over this space. There are stories about dad's moving to be nearer their surviving children, what living in Wisconsin is

"really" like, why people should, "accept our [U.S.] president!" One gold star father stressed the importance to me in gold star parents having religious faith because it, in his words, "helps you handle it good."

Crammed into an overcrowded booth in a loud bar, I sit on the edge of a bench as the dad next to me tells me about the son who made him a gold star. Before deployment, the son had looked into purchasing a track home in a small suburb. It was a new housing community and the son had two choices in housing. He called the developer himself and negotiated the floor plans to include just a little more space. The developer was surprised and impressed by him. The son was allowed the extra space. After his death, a street in the housing community was named in his honor. The father tells me this story, between sips and clinks of his glass, beaming with pride. He looks my face over, seemingly for my reaction. We are shouting because of the noise. He then describes the musical accomplishments of a surviving son and talks about the ways they want to encourage him.

Most of my participants and area of focus centers around the mothers. I do not think it is farfetched to suggest that masculinity and social expectations of fatherhood likely play a role in how gold star dads talk about their children and interact with one another at conventions. Motherhood may also factor in. Research on pressures of motherhood show that the more a mother internalizes the social expectations and pressures on mothers, the more likely they are to perform gatekeeping. (Meeussen and Van Larr 2018). Motherhood gatekeeping is when the mother takes on domestic roles and micromanages or even re-does father's attempts (Allen and Hawkins 1999; Meeussen and Van Larr 2018; Puhlman and Pasley 2013). It is possible that the legacy building and

expressive grief falls into type of motherhood gatekeeping during bereavement. More research in this may help explain why fathers take a back seat and supportive position during the GSMO convention and why mothers take on more of the legacy work. Additional research on gold star fathers should be done to see how they interpret their roles in the organization and their roles as fathers. There have been some attempts by gold star fathers to start their own group but they quickly dissipate.

Fathers carry their own weight in terms of grief. Masculinity norms often insist that fathers remain strong, protective, supportive, and rarely show sadness or pain. They maintain space for the mothers without having any real place for themselves. This may be complicated by survivors guilt. One of the few fathers I spoke with described feeling responsible for their son's decision to join.

> I have a lot of guilt too. I was on my way to Iraq when JP called and said he wanted to join the service, he didn't want to sit on the sidelines with the war on terror. He said what service should I join? I played the war game in my head over and over. What is the safest service he could possibly join? The first was the Navy. But then he joins the Navy and picks the most dangerous job there. Navy aviation has the highest risk. After he was killed, I felt guilt for a very long time. It took a lot of family members and friends saying you have no reason for that.

There is no way Jed could have known what would happen to his son, even with his military background. Yes, the risk was always there, but it is a risk Jed tried to mitigate by advising what he thought would be the safest branch at that time. Feelings of guilt or responsibility of a son's death is common among bereaved parents (Miles and Demi 1986). It was not Jed's fault that his son died, but it is a guilt that he and fathers like him may share.

What I can say from my observations, is gold star fathers on dad and guests tours have their moments of reverence, and respect for military leaders, but it is performed in a

different way than the mothers. There is less formality and ceremony, perhaps because of the nature of the trip. Unlike meals with the mothers, there are not long speeches or teary eyes before the guest tour lunch. When it comes even to organizing, the dads are secondary to the mothers. They will tell you that they do have a Gold Star Dad's group but that it doesn't meet and is largely inactive. It is possible that if this tour slot were not in some part arranged by a gold star mother then these fathers likely would not group together in this manner. A latent function of the outing may even be an attempt of the GSM to encourage the GSDs and other gold star family members to open up to one another and discuss their children/siblings and grief more. More direct research needs to be conducted to say conclusively.

Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed the ways markers of belonging and deservingness are used to shape a gold star mother's identity and to plot herself as a mother on a map of valor and deservingness. This deservingness is plotted by points that look at relationship to the deceased child and type of mother as the main two components. Others include income status, participation in organization planning and leadership, and cohort affiliation. Symbols of deservingness are worn through required attire, badges, pins, ribbons, name tags, and other memorabilia.

Events such as the business meeting have a direct impact on membership criteria and the available language and resources a mother has to support their identity claims in terms of organizational belonging and deserving. They control who is allowed into the organization, who counts as a gold star mother, and even who counts as a mother. Exclusion of membership conveys a belief of deservingness for the one not granted

access. Through grief in politics, the organization influences perceptions of gold star mothers on a national scale. They support status quo narratives of what a service member is, what sacrifice looks like, and who gold star mothers are. They distribute narratives of heroic and meaningful deaths, purposeful service, and ongoing legacy. They simultaneously gatekeep who has access to these narratives and who is able to shape the discourses.

As social marking is performed, voting members also construct what it means to have a "good death" in the sense of a service loss. Again, members would tell you that they would not wish the loss of a child on anyone. But, if a child has to die, mothers recognize that some aspects are more preferable than others. The top criteria for "good deaths" are preferred process, pain free, emotionally stable, and with honor. For gold star mothers, knowing their child died doing something they found purpose in, that it was sudden and hopefully pain free, that the child recognized the risk, that they possibly died for a greater cause, and that they can be honored are more desirable than alternative death stories. Yet, these death stories are negotiated and socially marked. Moms of those who died by suicide have to combat the emotional stability component. Mothers of those missing in action must reconcile with never seeing the body again. The more closely a death fits the political images of a service member loss, the more likely it is to be considered a "good death". It becomes code for a death deserving of honor, remembrance, and legacy. Those who do not meet membership criteria due to manner of death or duty technicality as mentioned with national guard members are contested and essentially being told that their child's death was not worthy, deserving, or good enough for the gold star and the organization. Inclusionist members or those supporting the

loosening of membership criteria and pushing against the more purist oriented gate keeping are working toward disrupting this pattern.

Debates on gatekeeping and the emotionally heated moments of the business meeting may put the organization's authenticity at risk. Inclusionist members already critique the membership criteria, purists express that the organization is losing its focus by allowing too many in, and others complain about membership dues considering their child has "already paid the price". The common bond starts to be questioned and the cohesiveness becomes strained. Maintaining emotional outbursts long enough to pass amendments, laws, and votes becomes crucial to the organization. The events following the business meeting are also vital to reconnecting torn factions and attempting to re-stitch the tapestry of unity. This is done through memorial services, tourist visits, additional activities, and the final banquet. The dad and guest tour also returns in time for a joint dinner, shifting the conversation to the tour's experience that day, with group political opinions simmering just below the surface and occasionally boiling over in the safety of their smaller cliques. The evening after the business meeting is often a time of processing. Some are disappointed, angry, exhausted. Some feel victorious, content, distracted. Others continue on with the conventions ever adjusting emotional tone. The next chapter carries on with the convention. The business of it is out of the way. The remainder is focused on honor, remembrance and legacy creation.

CHAPTER EIGHT: REMEMBRANCE AND LEGACY

Each convention is different from the ones before it. The differences are not just city and board, but the events too. Some events are mainstays. Of the four conventions I have attended, there are always workshops, usually some Friday night welcome, the Opening meeting, Dad and guest's tour while the Mothers have their business meeting and luncheon. There is always a memorial ceremony for the Gold Star Mothers who have passed since the last convention. There is an installation ceremony that ushers in the new board and new president, and there is always a final banquet. In between these events, are various smaller outings, opportunities, and expectations. How this occurs is up to the board president and her organizing committee.

> My year I had a speaker from central office of volunteer services speak at the VAVS (Veterans Affairs Voluntary Service) luncheon. A meal is served. If you want to pass out certificates or some acknowledgement of the things the reps do then you put that together.

In the year that the bulk of these descriptions are pulled from, there was a tea party, a suicide prevention walk, a memorial for mothers, and a memorial service for their sons and daughters. Each of these events have manifest functions. They are designed to educate, propose, vote, explore, distract, honor, and remember. The latter two, "honor and remember" are embedded into the very fabric of the convention and permeate each event. The language of honor and remember is used to create legacy, to maintain the lifespan of their child's social self, and to make sense of gold star motherhood. In this chapter, we explore how mothers and the organization make sense through the discourses of honor and remembrance. Through this is legacy work through gold star parenting roles.

> What does it mean to be a gold star mother? It means to serve. It means to serve for my son and to give back in his honor and in his memory. For my sanity, it means to do that. I like wearing my white. I'm proud wearing my white. When I have it on, it is me acknowledging my son and standing up serving for them. – Anne

Anne continues to parent the memory of her son through legacy construction. She claims the identity of gold star mother and serves as a means of connecting with her deceased son and continuing his service through her. Each act she does reinforces her identity as a gold star parent and writes another line in her son's legacy. She shares memories so others may know him. She engages in activities to spread his good deeds. She nurtures his memory.

Day Four: Group Cohesion

It's morning at the manor. Birds are tweeting. The air is crisp. Grass is still wet with dew. I wait with a group of mothers to tour the grounds and structures of the large assisted living facility. It is a space reserved for gold star moms first, dads, then if there are any remaining apartments veterans may claim them. This place is the future for some of these on tour. A mom I've been acquainted with for a couple of years holds my hand as we tour through the living quarters. Packed together in this aging spectacle, mothers ask questions about lifestyle, pricing, availability, and comment on closet size and future visits from grandchildren. Some of these mothers have no surviving children to potentially move in with or take care of them in their old age. Others simply value their autonomy and do not want to burden their families. In this place, they imagine they would be honored – a rhetoric pushed through the manor's representative every convention year.

The manor grounds are peaceful. Birds flutter among the large trees above. Vibrant flowers, a sprawling manicured lawn, and water features helps one forget they are essentially in a desert. Large banners loom from the light poles with names and pictures of the fallen on them. It is a daily reminder of their gold star status and why they are allowed to reside there. As gold star mothers, they are deserving of this space.

We end the tour and walk towards a gathering in the middle of the courtyard. Chairs are set up facing a makeshift staging area. The weather is mild and a light breeze dances through white hair and fluffs their sparkling white skirts. A line of mothers begins to form at the back. They shuffle about organizing themselves. “Am I supposed to stand here? Are you in front of me?” Occasionally, one chuckles, “I don’t know what I am doing”. They wave to others. Overall, the chatter is kept quiet. Nearing the start time, facework is engaged as a means of matching the transitioning emotional codes. The smiles begin to fade. I see a mother take a deep breath. Another looks down at the rose in her hands. Those not involved take their seats. The tone is solemn and hushed despite the smiles and the bright white uniforms of the mothers. This is the first of a couple of memorial services. This one, is for the Mothers who passed away the following year. The recognition acknowledges their service as mothers to their fallen child and to the organization.

Gentle music plays over the towering black speakers, ending with a rendition of, “God Bless America.” At the center stage is a table with a white table cloth, black sash, and gold star flag. Candles symbolize “God’s divine light.” The bible is opened to signify divine guidance for the mother and the organization. The GSMO charter is placed followed by a floral tribute laid by a past national president. A song is played regarding

the Lord's plan. Then there is silence under the trees. Christian tones embed themselves throughout the organization. A Chaplain prays before the majority of events. The bible and scripture are frequently referred to. Even the design of the organization and the common narratives reflect that of Christianity. Mothers seek moral purity while honoring their fallen children. Their children are sanctified for their valiant and selfless sacrifice made for the good of others. Even those who did not die in action are often still situated in the martyred fashion because of their willingness to join and to have given their life if necessary. Similar to Mother Mary, these dutiful mothers, having witnessed the loss of their child, get up, go out, and continue their loved one's legacy by sharing their child's stories and committing acts of service in their child's name.

Honoring and remembering is the bread and butter of GSMO. This is most commonly signified through a "say their name" emphasis. One belief that the Gold Star Mothers have collectively adopted is the notion of two deaths. The first occurs in the corporeal sense. It is the death that occurs when the heart ceases to beat, the last breath is taken, and the body stops (Hallam et al 1999). The second death occurs when the name and the person are forgotten. "Say their names" helps keep the memory alive and in that sense, the child is not fully gone.

It is Christmas week and I am scrolling through Facebook. A post from GSMO catches my attention. It is a call for names. They establish a virtual safe space for mothers and other followers to comment their deceased one's name in holiday remembrance. The comments quickly render. Name after name, the mothers and parents add their children.

When speaking to mothers at the convention, over dinner, and in phone interviews, a common perspective is that the mother holds the most name power. From this view, it is the mother who carries that legacy the strongest. It is the mother who doubts others will carry on the legacy work for their child after the mother passes. For some mothers, their own corporeal death also signifies the social death for their child. It adds a double meaning to the convention's memorial service.

Back to summer and the convention. The mothers lined at the back of the service are each holding a predetermined amount of white and yellow roses. The chaplain, standing at the front says a prayer before calling the names of the recently departed gold star mothers and known gold star fathers. Organized by state chapter, the representative mother walks in slow procession down the aisle to the table. She pauses. A white rose is placed for each mother she is standing in for. A yellow rose is placed for the father. The representative mother then gives pause and takes a step back after placing her last rose. The chaplain and mother then meet eyes and signify acknowledgement, either by a head nod, a whispered "thank you", or a hand over the heart. Tears may well up for the mothers who were especially close to the representative or chaplain. The representative mother walks to the side and the next mother is called to begin her slow procession. This continues until the last name is called.

A folded American flag is brought out and unfolded. Gold star dads step up to unfold, "in recognition of a grateful nation," meant to honor the mother's sacrifice of their child. The chaplain steps aside as the Americanism Chair presides. She explains each fold of the flag as the dads carefully work. A prayer is said for the families of the now departed gold star mothers and fathers represented on this day.

A gold star father who is a reverend speaks at this year's service. He mentions how the president's son would be proud. He tells anecdotes of his son. He describes the two death concept of body and then of name. The reverend asserts that "God blesses those who mourn," speaks of eternal life, comfort in heaven, and pride in those who serve our country. He speaks to the common bond the parents share through the loss of their children. Gold star mothers are then described as strong, courageous, and a gift used by God to ease other's suffering. "God took our pain to help others." Finally, he says to the roses and symbolically the deceased parents, "we will never forget you" – suggesting that in memory, they will continue their social life and their legacy and service will go on. The chaplain steps back up and read's a passage from Isaiah 55: 8-9, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord. 9 "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.". The hymnal, "It is Well With My Soul" plays softly over the speakers. Another prayer is said. The flags are retired. The national board stands and slowly walks out. Bag pipes play the Armed Forces Medley which honors each main branch.

In this memorial, honor and remembrance is at the forefront. Through this, narratives swirl of the importance of legacy work for the mothers and their sons. Those who do the most to promote their child's legacy are more likely to be remembered and therefore have their own social selves extended post mortem. Because gold star mothers and their deceased children are bounded selves, meaning they cannot be separated and both remain whole (Hallam et al 1999), the mother's continued legacy means the child's legacy is also carried on. Attendees regardless of political or religious affiliation are

ladened with patriotic and Christian narratives, further cementing the two together in a way that is often politically represented and weaponized in mainstream narratives. In order for one to be seen as a good mother to the deceased, to have the organization's platform for legacy work, and to claim membership, they must adopt these narratives to some degree. The mothers are told that they are blessed by God for their sacrifice and as such, they are given more honor credence. While they are doing this, they must also contend with the emotional tone of the event, managing the solemn reverence without being distractingly overcome with emotions or displaying the incorrect emotion. A successful memorial service leaves the attendees feeling reconnected and reinvigorated in their identities.

God Winks – Finding Meaning in Signs

As the music sifted through the trees concealing the sound of the rustling leaves two butterflies swooped overhead, dancing above the seated audience. Some mothers pointed, drawing attention towards the butterflies. "Did you see that?" I would hear after the ceremony. "I did. It was just… it was a god wink." "It sure was." "No other way to explain it."

God winks are symbolic moments when an external sign is perceived to communicate a visit or gift from heaven (Rushnell, 2006). It may be to the mother that her child is with her or in this case that the deceased gold star parents are thanking them.

> I was out in an area one night when I saw a Humvee drive up. It was the same kind of truck that Brent was driving when he lost. I pointed it out to the person I was with. The truck stopped and shut down, turned off its lights. We stared for a few moments. Then the truck started back up, drove and took a right turn back into the darkness. There was no reason for a truck to be there that size. There are many things one might say about this. I'm not a particularly religious person but I think that was Brent saying goodbye.

Mothers such as the one above find meaning in confusing situations. Another mother, on the flight home after finding out about her son's passing, believed she saw him on the plane wing smiling and took this as a sign that he was okay and with her. These god winks help mothers to make sense of the senseless, that is losing their child. By experiencing these signs or messages, they may interpret that their child is in a position of privilege, in a good place, still alive in spirit, watching over the mother, and approving of the mother's actions. It validates her task of parenting after the death and her memories of being a worthy mother when the child was alive. God winks are commonly described at the convention and in interviews. They are not relegated to gold star experiences but are prevalent among them. A butterfly flutters above us, a beautiful sunset on a retreat, a warm breeze, a stranger helping a mother carry a suitcase may all be referred to as "god winks", symbols that their child is looking down on them and sending a message that they are there and okay.

Another example of this came through a correspondence regarding "angel hugs" with a participant, as shown below:

> Hi Brittany,
>
> Attached is the special quote that I love so much.
> I found it 6 months after [son's name] died – God sure knows what helps people – it helped me so much.
> I would get these panic like attacks. Then I saw this and realized that they are not panic attacks, they are Angel Hugs. After that the attacks did not hurt as much and in a way I would almost look forward to them.

For this gold star mother, "angel hugs" or the physical sense that their loved one is trying to connect, helps her interpret her everyday experiences through her bounded self with her deceased child. A panic attack coded as an angel hug suggests the mother is

not alone, is engaged in celestially approved activities, and is able to connect on a near physical level with her child, thus further validating her performance of mother to the deceased. The use of god winks, as well as angel hugs, along with a new normal, sisterhood, and common bond serves as discursive techniques for the mothers to convey otherwise surreal feelings and interpretations of their situations. For one mom, a god wink led her to personal closure and to possibly alleviate some guilt for one of her son's comrades.

> If you look at grief, then you look at the delayed grief response. And my son was always a jokester. So, maybe he didn't die. Maybe he was going to come home. So, I had to go to the homecoming to physically see that my son was not going to cross that bridge and was not going to say, "Ha! Fooled you". I wanted to talk to each of them to ask them if my son was breathing after the explosion. I found out many different things, including that he was on fire. So, I talked to each of the guys but one. I hadn't talked to one person and I needed to talk to this one person. You may have heard of the term god winks? Events happen and sometimes people will say they have a vision of their son or a vision of their daughter and I think that helps gold star families process. That maybe they still have a connection – maybe a spirt or soul connection.
>
> I was staying at a hotel and was looking for someone. I opened the door and was in a sort of panicked state to find this marine. A crowd was gathered outside of my hallway and one of the moms turned to look at me and I said I need to find this marine – and I knew his name. She said, "my son?" and I said, _____ is your son? Yes. I need to talk to him. I was in a bit of a manic state. She goes, Oh, well he is right here. He was in the hallway. I apologized and said, "I'm Steven's mom and I just need to hear from everyone who was in the convoy and I just need to know if my son was dead or alive. He turned around and was very upset. We stepped out from the group. He said, "I'm the reason your son died." They changed the rotation of the Humvees and ISIS always hunted the 2nd. My son had been in the back and my son had just rotated up to the second position. _____ thought he should have been in that position. He was in the first position and said he should have been more astute and more aware that it looked like a set up. That there was going to be an attack. He had carried this guilt with him all through his deployment. So, it was a great opportunity for a lot of healing from me. It was confirmation for me that he did die in Iraq that they said, he was not breathing. He was dead. And I told him, he was not the reason Steven died. That was not on him. We had a long talk.

In this account, the mother is driven to verify her son's death by seeking information from his fellow service members upon their homecoming. It is when she is in her hotel room that she experiences an overwhelming urge to find this last person. The urgency and the coincidence of her finding him via his mother being the first person she asked was communication that this was a message from her son. He was pushing her to speak to this particular marine. Learning of his guilt, the mother made additional sense of the scenario. She discovered more information of her son's death and helped to alleviate some guilt from the fellow marine. Given the high veteran suicide rates, this moment may have been important in extending this marine's life. This adds to her personal narratives as mother listening to her son, loving son helping mother, and son and mother teaming up to help a marine.

These and similar discourses are used in various ways throughout observation and interviews. They are used to describe experiences and at times to combat larger narratives. For instance, when discussing grief over time, participants reject the stages of grief model (Kubler-Ross, 1973) by constructing new ways of framing their grief experiences. "It never goes away, you just learn to live with it better." Similar to Gubrium's (1989) research on Alzheimer's patients and caregivers, gold star mothers use everyday language and discourses to make sense of what they already experience in their lives and their surroundings. These discourses do not create the circumstances of loss, life, and motherhood, but they do help mothers interpret them. These signs and symbols along with the names and stories help maintain the gold star mother's status, provide further space to spread their child's legacy, and serve as indicators of "a common bond" linking members with one another, thus providing a semblance of community while

perpetuating a cultural, religious, and political narrative of service member loss, valor, and grief. The vignettes show the importance of naming and politics of the name. As I mentioned, the importance of saying the name is immense. It signifies a part of the loved one that is preserved, socially living, and remembered. Saying their name, means their life was not in vain.

A Walk for Suicide

Following the memorial, was a tea luncheon in the Manor cafeteria, where mothers shrugged off the solemnity and mingled with tiny cakes in hand. Miniature tiaras were placed on the table next to the cups of tea. A photo booth was set up and the mood became jovial, reiterating that while there are mournful events, that part of the organization is to connect across an array of emotions. A group photo of all of the mothers in attendance was organized. The photographer stood on a tall ladder, directing the mothers to squeeze in, smile, switch places, etc. One mother gave me her camera and asked that I take some of the group photos too for her personal use. I stood adjacent to the photographer but firmly on the floor, and tried my best to snap a few different angles. These group photographs serve as a visual claim that the convention is a place where gold star mothers can be together, have fun, and be active in service and legacy work. It signals a moment of unity and group cohesion and supports the organization's identity claims.

The laughter simmered again as we retreated back outside for the installation of officers. This is a high ceremony event wherein the old officers are brought in followed by an ushering of new officers. The outgoing president is pinned with a "past national president" pin, typically given by a member from her family. A flag is folded by the

outgoing president's family and sometimes in combination with the incoming president's family or other gold star dads present. The old officers take their seats in the crowd. The new officers are introduced by the officiant who is typically a past national president. They are positioned in a semi-circle with their backs to the crowd. They are individually called to step forward and are read their duties and responsibilities. They agree to accept them. They are then ceremoniously taken by the hand and walked one by one to their seats at the national board table, now facing the crowd. Their new titles are propped as plaques in front of them. Then, the group of new officers are asked to raise their hands and pledge their responsibilities. They may then take their seats.

The incoming president is pinned with her National President pin. In the post-pandemic ceremony, the incoming president was also bequeathed a full size tiara as a symbolic "passing the crown" from a Vietnam mom and Past National President (though not immediate Past National President) who had taken a mentor role for the incoming President. was taken and then we boarded the chartered busses to the next event. In this event, we have a re-exertion of social hierarchy immediately following the cohesion event of the tea party and unity of the memorial service.

It was now late afternoon going into evening. We traveled over an hour to a city park with a war monument that we would eventually visit. We gathered into the recreation building. Mothers changed clothes, exchanging white blouses for purple t-shirts. We went through the buffet line and munched on our cocktail weenies on tooth picks as we listened to the speakers discuss the history of the monument and exude their gratitude for the gold star mothers in attendance. We talked and joked about food. "First there wasn't enough and now they are feeding us every two hours!" People poked around

the rec hall trying to pass the time. Idleness at the convention gives attendees ample opportunity to critique the organization, planning committee, and to gossip. It also provides space for stories to be shared. Finally, we are instructed to head outside. A wide sidewalk leads just past the playground, curving under trees, making a large circle.

We walk the paved loop around a city park two point two times, symbolic for their two point two miles initiative aimed at raising awareness for the estimated twenty-two veterans a day who die by suicide. The number is contested one. One argument is that it is a conservative number with some positing that twenty-seven a day is more likely (Suitt 2021). Others claim it is liberal with the real number averaging around seventeen. Regardless, the number of deaths by suicide for veterans has exceeded 6,000 a year since 2008 (Suitt 2021). Over 65,000 United States veterans have died by suicide between 2010 and 2021 (White House 2021 a). Service member suicide rates are on the rise too with 2018, 2019, and 2020 recording the most numbers per year of active service member suicide since 2012 (Ibid and Orvis 2020; Suitt 2021). According to the Department of Defense Undersecretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness Annual Suicide Report (2019) for calendar year 2018, there were 541 confirmed or pending active duty suicide deaths. There were 325 suicide deaths among Service members in the Active Component, 81 deaths in the Reserve, and 135 deaths in the National Guard, respectively. As mentioned previously, only if it can be proven that the death by suicide was combat related, then the mother may be considered membership eligible to the GSMO. While this report includes Reservists and National Guard members, other suicide reports may omit them.

At least 7 congressional laws have gone in place between 2011 to 2021 to help curb the rates of suicide (Kamereck and Mendez 2021). In 2007, the parents of Joshua Omvig – a recently returned veteran who died by suicide less than 2 months after coming home – saw the passing of the Joshua Omvig Suicide Prevention Act. The bill is a veterans mental health bill aimed at improving mental health VA care to returning service members. A few outcomes of the bill is to require screenings for mental health and suicide ideation for those who seek VA services, a peer to peer counseling group, a veteran specific suicide hotline, and education of staff and employees on mental health and suicide prevention. The most recent initiative at the time of my writing is President Joe Biden's strategy for preventing veteran and service member suicide through: 1) Preventing Lethal Means Safety, 2) Enhance Crisis Care and Facilitate Care Transitions, 3) Increase Access to and Delivery of Effective Care, 4) Address Upstream Risk and Protective Factors, and 5) Increase Research Coordination, Data Sharing, and Evaluation Efforts (White House 2021b).

A light breeze keeps the sweat at bay. Small purple, plastic yard signs have been positioned every few feet. At a glance one might assume they were part of a political campaign or encouraging a local sports team. But the names listed in white on these signs are not politicians or athletes. They are the names of fallen service members – some killed in action, some killed by accident, or a byproduct of war including suicide. These naming signs alternate with value signs every few feet. Value signs are purple but instead of names of the fallen, they display values like, "Courage", "Valor", and "Honor", in bold white font. These value signs reaffirm the discourses of service member loss and reassert the ways a mother can code their child's legacy. A Gold Star Mother asks,

"Brittany, will you take our picture?" I gladly accept the camera as three mothers kneel around one of the thin signs. The names on this sign are their sons' names. This trend continues around the track. A different sign, a different Mother stopping to take a picture with their child's… names. Some mothers smile, point at the names, hold up stuffed animals or other mementos. Some kneel silently with stoic faces, some lightly cry. In a later interview, one mother who had her picture taken while pointing to her son's name explained, "It is so special to see your son's name on something. It is meaningful." Seeing the name means their child is still remembered. It means their memory exists. Their legacy is continuing. It also gives the mother a new moment with her son. The mother can no longer have pictures taken with her physical child on vacation or during life moments. Here, she takes a picture with the legacy in this new place, creating new memories. The camera captures her ongoing parenting of that child's remembered self and legacy.

Mothers share stories on this walk and talk about the weather. Some groups are quiet, sad, with tears. Some choke up talking about their children. Other groups express joy, critiques, and distractions. The tone may shift as they pass their child's name. This walk serves a few functions. On the outside, it acts as a call for improving veteran care and reducing the amount of veteran suicides. The addition of the naming signs boosts inclusivity in the organization by including without hierarchical marking the names of all the members fallen regardless of how they died. This further serves to promote feelings of connectivity and group cohesion. The walk itself and the yearlong initiative accompanying it actively works to legitimize the veteran suicide as service connected and speaks politically to the ways the country fails our veterans. This is in opposition to the

voting pattern of allowing moms of suicide victims as full voting members into the group. The event is also careful not to critique the government or the military. These suicide deaths are framed as a sad byproduct of war. “They came home but never left the battlefield” is a phrase that was said multiple times during the walk and in interviews. It insinuates that their deaths are still enemy caused.

The spectacle signals grief politics. The suicide walk serves as politics of grief, raising awareness and performing care. It is grief in politics for those raising funds for veteran service projects directly aimed at reducing veteran suicide. Not all mothers enjoyed the walk. As one participant phrased it in an interview months later,

> I was pretty upset about that at the convention. I didn’t feel like that’s what we were there for. We were there for our fallen. I did not buy one of those shirts. I did not care what it was. I think honestly, now they’re (GSMO) using it (veteran suicide) as a crutch. I dated a sergeant major for years and he also says suicide from PTSD is the cowards way out.

While some mothers disagree with including moms of veteran and service member suicide into the organization, this sets an organizational tone that says, “we see you, and we see what is going on”, but their actions are limited. Because of these things, the very act of this walk is political in group and externally. The organization could critique more and speak out in more impassioned ways. Instead, they work subtly within the national discourses, supporting government and community efforts to reduce the rates of suicide and suicidality without blaming the government or military.

Find their Names

The suicide walk concludes at an Iraq and Afghanistan war memorial just off of the loop. A crowd of Mothers have already arrived. The emotional environment rapidly and abruptly shifts without direction from leaders. It is emotional chaos. The atmosphere

is a mix of order as mothers systematically look for their child's name, frenzy to find the correct stone of the correct name, and a moment where time stands still. There are at least seven large four-sided stone pillars on a concrete pad. I weave between what becomes a maze of stone, people, and emotion. Women are quickly scanning the dark engravings for their child's name with their fingers. Volunteers with thick white binders and badges distribute charcoal and paper. The plastic signs on the suicide walk were a nice touch by the organization but these pillars mean more. These last longer. They carry more weight. The feeling is more somber. There is no laughter here. I hear sobbing. Not from everybody, but somebody. "Can you help me find my son's name?" I am asked. Chills run down my arms as I scan name after name. "I'm going to ask him", I say, and I quickly get the location from one of the memorial volunteers. He locates it in the binder and accompanies me to point it out to the mother. I watch as she uses the provided charcoal and paper to make an etching of the name.

"Because his name is not here," A mother exclaims among the frenzy. There is a sound of anguish from her voice. It hits me. Their child's name is not here. Only KIA are. Specifically, only KIA from October 2001 to December 2014 are here. This sharp contrast to the inclusivity of the suicide walk signs reinstates the hierarchy of type of death and cohort affiliation. It communicates to the mothers excluded that this moment is not for them. Their service member is not memorialized here. I look out from this maze to see other mothers and families sitting off to the side or walking away entirely. One mother is weeping as she runs her finger down name, after name, after name, reading them out loud. A mother walks by me, touches my arm, and says, "It has been… an emotional day." The sun begins to set. The crowd thins. A mother sits on the ground in

front of her son's name. She isn't etching or taking photos. She is just sitting, cross legged, staring at her son's name on the stone. At a glance, the names on the signs could have stood for anything. They could have been supporting a sports team off to the finals. It could have been welcoming people home. A mother could have pretended it was something else. There was space between to talk. At the monument, the names etched in black stone looked like a memorial of the dead. Here, the names were ostensibly permanent. The magnitude of the columns and the small font, the time it took to find the names, perhaps brought its own reality to the cumulative loss felt there. There was loss of child, loss of honor for those not KIA, and loss of time for those older.

Forgotten Names

A grassy path leads from the war memorial to another collection of chairs similar to the staging area at the manor that morning, the chairs face a podium. The memorial and setting sun are in the background of the podium. Music plays. Lee Greenwood's, "God Bless the USA" is included in the song list. Typically reserved for the final banquet, this song is a participation song for Gold Star Mothers. Even here, in this memorial space, the mothers still clasped hands, sang the words they knew, and raised their arms high into the air at the words, "I'll gladly stand up next to you". There is chatter and talking after this song. The music provides a brief emotional reprieve and a spotty reconnection with one another.

We hear from a veteran who speaks about his experiences with post-traumatic stress disorder, mental health, and loss. He is young and moves several mothers to tears. The National President gives a small speech about the importance of saying their children's names and then proceeds to read off a list of names of the attendee's children.

The mother of the name called stands to be acknowledged before sitting back down. Each of the attendees was tasked with sending in their child's name. Unfortunately, several names were missing from the list.

The national president finished the roll and a mother stood up. Her son's name was missing. What's worse, is it was the ten year anniversary to the day of his death. She went to the front, sobbing, trying to say his name into the microphone while overcome with the emotion of the anniversary, the omission, and grief. Another mother stood after her to say her child's name. Some in the audience gasped that a second name was missing, cried, and shook their heads at the omission. The president reminded the audience that people were supposed to send the names in as an attempt to deflect the judgement and mistake. A few other mother's stood. The president asked someone seated if she had the correct list. One mother walked to the front and another stood where she was seated. They said their children's names. A couple of mothers were not able to speak through their tears and a gold star dad – the president's spouse - walked around to speak their names clearly. It is possible that people missed the call for names, or they sent them in late, or the final list wasn't updated. Perhaps a page was somehow missing. "That's the kind of list you check 202 times to make sure it is correct." – Amy. It was clear by the shock and embarrassment that this was not intentional. Whatever the reason for the omissions, I write about it here to showcase how crucial saying their names is to these mothers and how painful their omission is – representing a sense of being forgotten and a social death. The list of names was not limited to any manner of death, branch, or cohort. It was a chance at inclusion, and it hurt to be forgotten. Those who had passed by the memorial without their child's name engraved may have experienced a compounding

feeling of forgotten and un-deservingness. I use un-deservingness in the continuum sense that I discussed in chapter seven. Those on the stone were positioned as deserving of the monument and the space. Those left off, were positioned elsewhere. Mother's whose children's names were on other monuments may have comforted themselves with this while those whose children's names are not included may have felt an additional sting and felt themselves positioned further on the deservingness spectrum.

This isn't the only time a name has been forgotten at a convention. When dealing with the amount of people attending, prompting them to send in information, gathering that, and speaking it, one might find it inevitable that a name may be accidentally left off. One might argue they could do away with this risk by taking out the practice all together.

At the post-pandemic convention, names were not spoken aloud, but a slide show with pictures and names of the sons and daughters was shown during the final banquet. It was set to sentimental music. Some mothers left, having chosen not to include their children or finding the show "too sad" to sit through. Others smiled as people applauded their child's pictures. Mothers stood at times when their child was shown or sat smiling at the projected images. One mother even rose to salute her son's picture. At the end of the slide show, a father stood. Others assumed it was a motion to give a standing ovation for the slide show and the loved ones honored. When about a quarter of people had stood and started clapping, and others were half way up, the father spoke out. "You all may forget him, (but he and his family would always remember the sacrifice of their son.)" The anger in his tone was cut with an awkward tension as the audience lowered themselves back in their chairs. The organizer of the slideshow reminded that people were supposed to send in the names and that she, aware of what had occurred at the memorial in years

prior, had even added some to the presentation during the convention weekend. Unlike the memorial of previous years, this stand was met with heads shaking disapprovingly at the father rather than at the board members.

Christian Narratives and Parallels

The service at the war memorial concluded with a song and remarks from the vocalist. She thanked the mothers and stated that she "gets to tuck my children in at night thanks to the sacrifice of your sons." She said when gold star mothers, "used to hold and rock your sons to sleep, you cradled the nation in your arms." This emboldens the discourse of valor for the mother's sons and daughters and further sanctifies the mother's place. Klass (1999) argues that ongoing psycho social bonds between mother and child sanctify their memory and connect the sacred and profane. To use the Christian theme that runs through the convention I interpret the use of Christian parallels in the following way, as Mary once cradled Christ who saved the world, these mother's at one time held their children, whose lives were lost serving or in some way related to their serving the nation. While some might push against this comparison if asked, it is an unspoken parallel running throughout the convention. This also is not to say that they literally think of themselves as equal to Mary and their children to Jesus Christ. It does point to thematic similarities and the narrative that their duty as mothers is to honor and share the living testimony of their child's sacrifice – a sacrifice freely given for the common good. This is a little more complex for non-KIA moms, who might see their child's willingness to serve as that valorous sacrifice regardless of how they perished.

This parallel also indicates the master narratives of grief situated in patriotism or patriotic grief. Rowbotham (2000) analyzed the sociocultural and historical religious

precedence in Britain's military forces. While considered a secular force, Christian ideology has influenced military narratives in the public mainstream. Similar to a religious martyr, national heroes exemplify the ultimate sacrifice in dying for one's country as Christ and some of his followers have died for the world. One of the survey responses highlights this.

> It makes me feel closer to God who sacrificed his son on the altar of salvation. We've sacrificed our son, to paraphrase President Lincoln, on the altar of freedom. – survey participant 14.

The national perception in Rowbotham's research as moral good aligns Britain up as the chosen ones. Britain's wars and military actions are thereby storied as God's will and their soldiers sacrifices sanctified. Considering the United States deep roots with Britain and our ongoing weaponization of Christianity, it is not a far stretch of the imagination to see similar ideologies for our troops, as indicated in the survey participant's claims to feel closer to God through the sacrifice of her son. The United States annually hosts a National Prayer Breakfast, Christian slogans persist in our National Anthem, and the phrase "God Bless Our Troops" is pervasive.

The fallen soldier is glorified and valorized, then risen to a place of honor. Pilgrimages to the Arlington National Cemetery, local monuments, famous battlefields, and the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier form their own types of tourism – patriotic grief tourism. We, the civilians, the survivors, the left behind, are tasked with honoring the legacies and giving due reverence. We set aside specific holidays for remembering. We are taught in elementary schools across the nation that our very freedom is because of those who have sacrificed, just as a Christian's freedom from the chains of the world is due to Christ's ultimate sacrifice. It is unsurprising that our discourses so closely parallel

to Christianity given the pervasive remnants of puritanism that permeate politics and mainstream discourses today. Witnessing it at this organizational level that is already directly tied to national politics, is something that might even be expected. However, I argue that the parallel is so woven in that it goes relatively unmarked to most members. It would be a breach of that, something that pushed against patriotism, against the patriotic discourses, and against the valor that would be seen as marked, deviant, atheist. Mothers who engage in this parallel may make sense of their identity as sacred or even divine. It implies a higher purpose for their child's death and instills a greater emphasis in constructing their child's legacy.

Experts at Shifting Tones

Following the memorial event, a station was set up for mothers to light candles for their children if they wanted. Some did. Others went straight to the chartered buses, eager to leave the scene and return to the hotel. The first half of the ride was quiet. Eventually, light chatter began. By the time we pulled up to the hotel, we were a more genial crew, having discussed politics, shoes, pets, and people. Unloading, people seemed to leave the heavy emotional tone of the day behind them. In the lobby, they took selfies, laughed, waited on friends, went to the hotel bar for drinks, made phone calls and plans for the day, and gossiped about organizational politics.

Not every convention is as heavy on emotional events as this one. They all have memorial services, but the amount and caliber depend on the National President, Chaplain, and National Board at that time. It is also important to note that in the afternoon between the morning memorial and the evening suicide walk was the installation of new officers, a tea party, and a group photo of mothers, causing the

emotional tones of each event to shift from solemn, to cheerful, to business, to social, to a range of emotions on the suicide walk, to chaos, grief, and another range of emotions at the evening memorial.

The installation occurred following a short break from the memorial. The tone shifted from music and god winks to a ceremony similar to the opening one. The old board was paraded to the front and excused. The new board was introduced. One by one, they were read the descriptions of their positions. Gathered in a semi-circle, they swore an oath to the organization and to uphold its values. Then one by one they were seated at their respective places at the table, led hand in hand by the banner guard or sergeant at arms. A pinning takes place, where the family of the incoming president pins her National President badge on her and family of the outgoing president pins her past national president (PNP) badge on her. The incoming president then makes her speech, setting the tone and theme for the following year. Thus, the transfer of power in the organizational sense is complete, though the convention is not quite over.

The tea party, taking place at the manor, was another photo opportunity. Stations were set up specifically for photos. Tiny plastic tiaras donned each table setting. Little pastries and treats were gathered through a buffet line. The atmosphere was light and people mingled with smiles and laughter. I even learned what clotted cream was. Towards the end, the organization's official photographer rearranged part of the room and positioned the mothers in rows for the group photo. This would be the convention's official photo for the year. One mother asked me to take a photo with her phone. This was a stark contrast from the scene an hour earlier. From a mindfulness stance, we know that there will be good days and bad, solemn moments, and moments of fun connection

and community. Convention attendees shift quickly between reminders of loss, memorializing, voting, organizational politics, tourism, treats, and being entertained.

Day Five. Therapeutic Moments and Sense Making

From the conventions I have seen, most end on day four. In another year, the war memorial event would have been replaced with the final banquet. Day five would have been reserved for departures. However, the convention we are closely following was stretched to five days. Members questioned this. Staying an extra day is expensive. It is time consuming. It is emotionally exhausting. But, the official response was that it allows for more sightseeing. For this year, day five is largely a tourist day ending with the final banquet that culminates the entire convention. Some did leave early for various reasons. Most seemed to stay for this fifth day.

I have described most of the main events of the convention. In between the high ceremonies, dinners, and memorials are tiny moments of catharsis, shared stories, and unstructured therapeutic moments.

I sat beside Ruth, a Vietnam Mom nearing the 50th anniversary of her son's passing, for breakfast, surrounded by members of her chapter. The mothers took turns around the table telling Ruth how much she meant to them. "She is our inspiration". Ruth looked to me and said, "I wouldn't be here without them. I can travel, but I don't like to alone. They take care of me."

"She really is our inspiration." – Another mother.

"If you can do this for fifty years," begins a third mother.

"Then so can you" Ruth interjects. Turning to the other, "Am I really? Am I really your inspiration?"

The table responds with a resounding yes. Ruth serves as that role model, having survived the stigmas of the Vietnam era, living for 5 decades without her son, going through the majority of conventional life course moments without him – weddings, birth of grandchildren, etc. The conversation shifts to their own stories. One of the mothers, a state president at the time, shares that she lost her son on Palm Sunday, seven years prior. One mother sent three Christmas gifts to her son before he was killed. Two of them were returned to her. The third was laid on her son's grave by an unknown person. Each of these mothers describes a disruption of their normal lives prior to loss. Juxtaposed are the differences of past expectations versus reality as a gold star. Sharing these stories is a reconciliation of their identity shift and an establishment or maintenance process of the common bond they share as gold stars. Another mother shares that:

> "All I got back was his billfold and a ring he had in there. In the billfold was a calendar where he would mark off the days until he got to come home."

For this mother, the billfold and ring were poor replacements for the living embrace of her child. Knowing he was counting down the days until his return gave the mother insight into his last days and months. He wanted to return. He thought of home. This becomes part of his legacy.

> "I had a psychiatrist tell me on my third visit that I had it all figured out." – Shelly.
>
> "What?! Why?" – the table responds
>
> "Because I had already lost my husband, so I guess I already know all about grief." After a pause and disgusted looks, she continues, "Losing a husband is nothing like losing… a child." – Shelly
>
> Lisa chimes in, "That's true. I've lost two husbands and I can get over them. I can't get over my son."

Beliefs of grief are challenged. Losing a child is placed as higher on a scale of loss. The inability to "get over" a child speaks to the "lifelong service" gold star mothers carry.

> Shelly continues. "Holidays are ruined. Whichever one it is, it will never be the same."
>
> Ruth, whose son was killed three days before Christmas adds, "I never decorated a tree again. It's been 50 years and I still have not decorated another tree."
>
> Lisa adds, "My [service] work is my legacy. I sometimes get by with saying it is my therapy, but it is truly my legacy.

New normals and expectations are recognized decades on, be it a shift in perspective, a refusal to decorate, or an emphasis on work as legacy. I am told of a daughter-in-law giving away all of the son's belongings, not allowing the mom or father to keep even a t-shirt. The mom described having to, "keep my mouth shut so she doesn't take away my grandsons." Another story is told about a mother who wasn't allowed to see her daughter's body.

These traumatic stories are told both during and outside of the convention. Disconnect is a common theme either through grandparent's not being allowed to see their fallen child's surviving children, someone else having access to their child's things, or even disconnect in receiving items. At the convention, these stories are reciprocated and infused with support, advice, or inspiration. These therapeutic moments take place in what I think of as the watering holes – that is the breakfast tables, the smoking areas, the hotel cafes, and the hallways. Walking through the lobby, one can easily spot a couple of mothers having private conversations, describing similar experiences of loss, disconnect, trauma, and grief. In this way, the convention serves as one large, unsupervised, group

therapy session. While the intent and advertisement is not therapeutic, the byproduct of so many mothers coming together are tiny therapeutic moments.

In comparing practitioner led and volunteer led support groups for bereaved family members, McDaid, et al. (2018) found that regular support groups help reduce anger at the deceased, guilt, grief, confusion, and shame. Conventions are annual and are not managed by a licensed practitioner but are nevertheless important for the mothers in terms of sense of community and commonality, understanding that there are more of them out there than their local communities might allude to. Frequent interactions throughout the convention weekend may serve as a buffer to cope with the emotionally heavy events. On the local level, regular biweekly or monthly chapter meetings may also serve along the lines of the volunteer led support groups mentioned in the McDaid et al study. These therapeutic moments also serve as ways to structure their gold star stories. They are stories of hardships and the things they have endured for loving their child.

Attendees spent the rest of the day on their own. In the lobby, I watched as a group of mothers flocked to an elderly gentlemen sandwiched between two marine garrisons. The mothers were giddy and gracious, reminding me of celebrity meet and greets. A photographer snapped their photo. The man and garrisons continued a few more feet before another group of mothers approached. I later learned that the man was the only remaining Medal of Honor Recipient left from the Battle of Iwo Jima during World War II – Woody Williams. I listened to Woody speak later that night at the final banquet. Dressed in military finery, Mr. Williams spoke to the mothers with mutual respect. He was grateful to them for their loss and their continued service. They were grateful for him. He spoke again a few years later at a post-pandemic convention. There, he told a

story about avoiding church. His wife had tried to convince him to go for some time but he came up with excuses. One Easter Sunday, his young daughter, dressed in all white, asked him to go. He said he thought she looked like an angel, so he put on his suit and went. The gold star mothers, dressed in their whites, also looked like angels, he said. He reinforces the Christian narratives, the sacred position they hold, and their deservingness of honor.

The Final Banquet

Arriving in the hotel ballroom for the final banquet, attendees are met by door greeters and encouraged to find their names. Breaking away from their uniformity, dress varies in style, color, and degree of formality. Some mothers wear sparkling evening gowns glittery enough to rival celebrity Vanna White. Other mothers may wear cocktail dresses, summer dresses, or their "Sunday's best". Some walk in as if on a red carpet. Men range from suites to business casual. There may have been a man one year wearing tails. Seated, a three course meal is served by banquet staff, followed by a round of coffee and sometimes champaign. Some groups attempt to sit together but usually there is some table mixture, making for new stories. Conversations stay cordial and light and there is some mingling between tables. The incoming president and outgoing president usually have their immediate families present.

As people begin finishing their entrees, the entertainment begins. This may be music at an increased volume on the stereo, a live military band, a group of USO performers, or a sequence of speakers. This year, the speaker was Woody Williams, followed by a presentation for one of the sponsored organizations, and loving speeches from the outgoing and incoming national presidents. At some point, the armed forces

medley is played. If you are unfamiliar, the song is a collection – medley – of each of the five major military branch's anthems. One stands as their affiliated branch's theme song plays. Families of the fallen stand for the anthem of their son or daughter. Veterans and their families stand again as their theme is played. In my case, we stand during the "Marine's Hymn" for my brother-in-law, Daniel. Then we stand again for my partner's song, "The Army Goes Rolling Along". Attendees often clap along to the beat while standing. Some may even sing along if they know the words (the medley at the convention is usually an instrumental version). My first convention was right after getting married to my partner. The entire weekend went smoothly until the banquet. Being an outsider unfamiliar with this custom and the norms around it, as well as the themes, I made the offense of not standing and momentarily angered those around me. It is not a mistake I have ever repeated.

A table is set at the front of the banquet hall, with a brief ceremony pointing out the symbolism in each detail. The setting represents the gathering's desire that the fallen could be there to eat with them. The candle, lit, represents hope going forward (The National League of POW/MIA 2017). A rose symbolizes the faith of families who serve. The inverted glass acknowledges the fallen will not be able to partake in the toast. A lemon wedge symbolizes the bitter loss and sprinkled salt represent the tears shed. A bible represents the fallen's strength of faith as "one nation under God" (The National League of POW/MIA 2017). Finally, the empty chair represents the fallen guest. Later, a fallen service toast is given. Five mothers each read from a script a toast for the five branches of the military.

The entertainment eventually winds down. Dessert plates are collected and coffee cups are drained. During the post-pandemic convention, this was the point where the slide show of their deceased children was shown. A final address and expression of gratitude is given by the outgoing president who has organized the convention. Just when you think it is time to go, the parting song plays. As I mentioned earlier in this manuscript, Lee Greenwood's "God Bless the U.S.A" is a special one for mothers at the conventions. It would be a massive faux pas for a guest to leave at this point. Some mothers even speak to individual guests subtly communicating this. All of the gold star mothers move toward the edges of the room forming a large and complete circle. Dads and guests are expected to join in. I have yet to see anyone refuse.

Hands reach out to clasp the one next to them. Connected, the circle sways as Greenwood's voice sings about American Pride, freedom, and remembering those who passed. There is a sense of effervescence. The circle creates a symbolic display of unity. Hands clasped represent a togetherness in the loss, life, and legacy. Reactions to the words support patriotic discourses of freedom above all and gratitude for those who fight for it. Each time the song mentions, standing up, the mothers' arms thrust assertively into the air, some heads raise, with tears in their eyes. A few sing loudly with an appearance of pride and empowerment beaming from their faces as if they could be heard in the heavens. The arms lower temporarily until the final crescendo. Then they remain raised through to the end.

The atmospheric emotion is tangible. The tone is one of utmost respect, honor, and unity. This is the last official moment of the entire convention and the point that attendees will walk away from. This connection, patriotism, and emboldening is designed

as a convention take away. There's often cheering and applause after the final "U---S---A." Mothers hug one another, exchange numbers if they haven't already, and say a cheery farewell to each other. Ending on this note allows attendees to leave on an emotional high just having participated in a bonding ritual. One might argue it is love bombing. Another, might say it is itself a cathartic and therapeutic moment. Either way, this spectacle of grief validates their parenting work in honoring their children, it folds into their legacy work that their child is one that should be honored in this collective and physical way, and it deepens the significance and emotional connection of patriotic discourses.

Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has concluded the convention. Picking up just after the business meeting and dad and guest tour, I analyze how the events and interactions that follow work to reseal the wounds created in the business meeting and how they serve as spaces to work on legacy, identity, and emphasize the permeation of national discourses. Each event sets its own emotional tone through scripts, scenery, interactions, statuses, and symbols. Attendees are expected to follow the feeling roles associated. In-between events, mothers share stories and craft their legacy stories. God winks, angel hugs, spiritual scriptures, prayers, and cultural scripts place gold star mothers on a sacred pedestal melding a type of national religion and emphasizing their divine status and patriotic duty.

At the memorial service, group cohesion and remembrance are on display as semblances of honor were thrust upon them visually and verbally. Mothers are united in the face of their own mortality and with it their child's social self and legacy remain secure. During the tea party, that unity is carried forward in more cheerful ways in the

present. Mothers breathed in their current lives, took photos, and participated in a photographic verification of the organization's authentic identity as a supportive, cohesive group of mothers serving through their loss. This also serves the nation to be able to speak of gold star families and have smiling images on websites devoted to them instead of anguished and mournful ones. Photos from the installation service also communicate that they are a longstanding group of ordered, rational, and patriotic mothers.

Events may be politicized both in the organization and in the narratives it endorses. The suicide walk carried contentions. The organization voted against allowing mothers of veteran or service member suicide from membership the day before. Here, they are walking in remembrance of them and to raise awareness in a way that is disconnected from governmental blame but still positions the rates as a problem worth addressing. More purist aligned members either refused to attend or did attend but were upset that the suicide component was an integral part of the outing. For purists, veteran suicide awareness is separate from the role and identity of the GSMO.

The importance of naming and name representation was also covered. Attending spaces where a mother's name is not included can influence her identity, legacy story, and position on the map of valor. The reason for the omission matters. Omission for suicide is different than omission for having a KIA from a previous or too recent event. They take up different positions on the deservingness subset. Forgetting a name when it should be included brings additional pain, weight, and discomfort. In moments like the war memorial service, this mistake jeopardizes the identity claims of the organization and

therefore its group authenticity. Both leaving off names and forgetting names sews friction and emotional conflict.

By the final banquet, the hope is any damage and strain is healed or at least put on the back burner during the event. It is a time for the mothers to look their best, be pampered by wait staff, have their identities reflected in speeches, and solidify connections made at the convention. The parting song serves as a bonding ritual producing symbols of unity, honor, respect, and legacy. At this point, the mothers and attendees leave invigorated in their individual missions and legacy work.

From here, they will continue work on chapter, state, and individual service projects, educational outreach, ceremonies, and other engagements meant to add to their legacy work and promote national discourses. To borrow from their charter, they will "perpetuate the memory of those whose lives were sacrificed in our wars" (Public Law 98-314 1984) and "inculcate lessons of patriotism and love of country in the communities in which we live" (Public Law 98-314 1984). The convention serves as an organizing role for the mother. It can support identity claims, contest, or reject them. Through differing characteristics, levels of deservingness are managed, spectacles of grief are organized, emotionality is guided, and techniques for legacy work are demonstrated. Connections and role models emphasize the accepted ways of carrying on a legacy. Through this identity work, mothers can shape a purpose for their child's loss, which adds to their notion of a good death. This is also a way for the mother to maintain her familial bond with her child and parent the memory and legacy of them. Here, the mother knows this version of her child more than anyone. She controls the image, the stories, and nurtures it in a way that positions her as a good gold star mother.

CHAPTER NINE: FROM PERSONAL TO SOCIAL IDENTITIES

Driving Westbound on Interstate 81 today, I passed under a bridge that was lined with fire trucks. One had its ladder raised with a large American flag draped from it. A few exits later, I drove past another showing of the American flag surrounded by police, EMTs, and firefighters. Curious, I looked at the local social media pages. The displays were part of an honor display for the dignified transport of one of the soldiers that was killed at the Kabul airport. His body is being transported to Arlington Cemetery and rescue workers and groups of civilians have plotted themselves along the route. My arms break out with chill bumps. He will be followed by his gold star family. The GSMO Facebook group has already posted his name and the names of the other twelve fallen. It is another spectacle, another shiny badge, another grief.

A Brief Review

Gold star families are those who have lost a loved one either in or as a result of active duty military. These are the parents, siblings, spouses, and children of military service members killed in action and non-combat related deaths such as vehicular crashes on or near post, fatal illnesses and injuries contracted during service, and veteran suicide. Gold star families span across race, ethnicity, religion, socio-economic status, education level, and cultural background. They are young families, older families, blended families, and even single-person families consisting of a mother who laid her only child to rest sixty years ago. Within each family is a story of disruption, of learning to live with loss and adjusting to a new normal.

Through this adjustment, gold star parents reconstruct their identities and engage in an ongoing process of meaning and sense making. Organization members learn

common phrases and adopt templates of sense making from older moms and organizational discourses which often reflect national discourses on honor, patriotism, valor, and respect. Members identities, and therefore some of their meanings of their role, are negotiated based on type of death, type of mother, and adhering to the sacredness or honor codes of patriotic remembrance. Membership criteria and status hierarchy is adjusted through markers of deservingness and influence how gold star mothers plot themselves on an identity map of valor. Non-members are still influenced by organizational efforts, initiatives, monuments, and legislative bills. All gold star families are subjected to the national discourses surrounding fallen service members, valor, honor, remembrance, and duty. Through the process of sense making and reconstructing identity, gold star mothers work towards legacy making for their children and arguably for themselves. Afterall, members know the name George Seibold over 100 years after his death solely because of his mother Grace Darling Seibold and her legacy work. Legacy work is a way for the mother to continue parenting roles for the memory of her child. In doing so, she keeps a piece of him alive.

This dissertation has explored the spectacle, politics, organizational and national discourses, lived experience, sense-making, and organizational impact of Gold Star Mothers. Through participant observation, interviews, survey, online presence, ethnographic fieldnotes, and layered accounting, this research addressed 5 key questions. 1) How do gold star mothers make sense of their lived experiences and gold star stories? 2) How do gold star mothers make sense of organization? 3) What role does the organization play in members sense making and identity construction? 4) How do the emotional, familial, and organizational spheres converge? And finally, 5) How is legacy

made and negotiated through these spaces? Using analytical frameworks of symbolic interaction, emotional discourse, emotion as work and craft, group affiliation, identity, and deservingness, we have at least gained insight on these questions.

Sense Making and Meaning

The stories told by gold star mothers suggest a process of sense making. The stocks of parental knowledge are fractured by the knock. Through the aftermath, the mother transitions how motherhood is performed for her now deceased child. She learns the new language of the gold star and is forced to navigate emotional, familial, and political spheres. Members must learn to compartmentalize and adapt swiftly during conventions. For all of these, sharing their child's story becomes purpose. That does not mean it is their sole purpose. Gold star mothers also speak of a new normal. This is not them "getting over grief" but learning to breathe with it.

When asked in the survey what being a gold star mother meant to them, participants stated honor and remember claims. "It means I am sad to be in this club but proud of what my son did for the country." – participant 3. "It means my son will never be forgotten." – participant 17. "It is a title of honor. It means a level of commitment our family made to fighting the war on terror." – participant 12. "We represent the fallen as their symbol of life". Many made sense of their gold star identities through service and group comfort. "It gives me purpose. I love honoring our veterans and teaching others patriotism." – participant 22. "It means finding the heart to give back to veterans and sympathize with military families every day." – participant 25. "I care for his comrades and other moms like me." – participant 30. "We share a common bond together. It means walking this journey together and advocating for veterans and service members." –

participant 40. Of the respondents, seventeen percent skipped this question. Thirty one percent spoke about the importance of honoring and remembering. Forty six percent listed service or comfort. Twelve percent spoke to other things such as loss and spirituality.

Organizational meetings require complicated, rapidly shifting, and intense emotion work. These are emotionally discursive and emotionally expressive environments where emotional discourse is drawn on and emotional expression is evoked, suppressed, and managed. A degree of emotional order and emotion work is necessary. Members require emotional stamina and resilience to volley between the emotional codes within various events. They go from moments of laughter, camaraderie, curiosity, and business to public reminders of their gold star status via memorials, photographic attributes, and names. In many ways, the GSMO relies on emotional connection to persist. Without it, the organization loses its authenticity and purpose.

As a follow up interview after the 2021 convention, I asked some previous participants what they think would happen if the organization dismantled. Would it matter? Most did not respond but of the few that did, the answer was a resounding, "No." They did not think it would matter. To them, the organization has become too bureaucratic and capitalistic. They feel the organization has lost sight of the genuine connectiveness of this "sisterhood". The members who responded had all experienced serious health issues in recent years and were disappointed to find that some of their "friends in the organization weren't really my friends afterall." They expected mothers to reach out to them and be there for them, but instead found themselves wanting. Non-member participants cited the "clique" or "sorority-esque nature" as deterrents for

joining. They also called attention to the discomfort in paying dues to belong to an organization when they already qualified through the loss of their child's life.

> What does being an GSMO mean to you? – Not a damn thing. I hate the term. Taking the gold star. When you lose your son or daughter you are automatically a gold star mom. So its two separate things. When you go to a meeting they mention certain things you need a membership for. I hate that. There are some events that some of my friends were turned down from because you have to be an American Gold Star Mom. They are gold star mothers. Period. You shouldn't tell them they can't go to something that involves GSMO because they aren't a member. Every year I say, "I won't join again."

In "A Social History of Dying", Allen Kellehear problematizes the parameters of death and dying but distinguishing between the physical death and the inner life. Within the gold star mother community is this notion of two deaths. The first is the falling of the corporeal body. The second occurs when the name is no longer said. It is a loss of memory, of identity, and creating their legacy, putting the names into stone or on a pavilion is a way to ensure that the name may carry on for longer than the family member. For each of my participants, legacy was constructed through stories of childhood, negotiations of what constitutes a "good death", what could have been, and through service.

> "When I heard the five words, "We regret to inform you", I knew my life would never be the same. It would be up to me to carry on [son's] legacy. It is important to do so in an honorable way that will make [son] proud and honor our military and families." – Amy

> "I took my son's service and made it mine." – Claudia

> "It represents my service to veterans and their family members in honor of my sister's sacrifice." – Mary

When telling their gold star stories and talking about the service work they do on individual and organizational levels, families are simultaneously forging a post-loss

identity for themselves while constructing a legacy for their loved one. They make new sense of their realities through the organizationally embedded narratives. Their service work both helps others while spreading the word about gold star families and military loss.

Mothers in this research were forced into a label that some had never even heard of. They answered the devastating knock on the door and navigated the political and social spectacle of their child's death. Grief politics pull at them and influence their legacy work. Through grief in politics, mother's individually and the organization as a whole works to make lasting changes which reflect back on their children's legacy stories. Politics of grief raise gold star families into the mainstream eye and are ways politicians use military loss and gold star bereavement as political platforms. The spectacles of grief reinforce patriotic and national ideology. Those that promote a social or cultural atheism are rarely given as much media attention or framed in a positive light.

Raising Awareness, Proposing Change

Mothers as going concerns learned how to negotiate their identity as mother, as a gold star, and for members – as an organizational member. Through interactions with self, others, and group affiliations, and organizationally and nationally embedded discourses, gold star mothers learn to make sense out of the senseless. They attribute meaning to the loss, establish social hierarchy, and at the organizational level they co-construct and manage group authenticity while supporting national patriotic narratives. They engage in events that are filled with emotion work and emotion codes. Through awareness, educational efforts, and service, mothers aim to keep their son's memory and therefore social selves alive for longer.

> When you hear other mother's stories they sound the same. They aren't exactly the same, but the thoughts and feelings are similar. You might say, I went through that too, I thought I was crazy. No, you aren't crazy, I felt that too. We aren't a support group. We are a veterans service organization. But the way we work through our grief is by doing that.

Members, non-members, and the organizational stance all agree that service members and the general public need more awareness of the existence of gold star families.

> I don't expect people to know what a gold star family is. I didn't know what a blue star family was until I was one and I didn't know what a gold star family was until I became one. But, I do expect people in the military to know. That's what drives me crazy sometimes. Like dude, we are part of you. – Vanna

> Active duty (military members) don't know Gold Star. We had a memorial day ceremony locally. Me and another mom attended at the memorial and you had all of these admirals, high ranking Navy officials. We are sitting with a t-shirt of our sons' pictures on it. They get up, they look, and they smile, and they had no idea what gold star meant or why we were sitting there at that memorial event with our son's pictures on it. So I went home and took it upon myself to look up every admiral that was at the event and wrote a personal note to them. I put my card in it. I said I was at the ceremony and I'm a gold star mom because my son was killed. – Renee

A few members argue GSMO is not doing enough to get the word out.

> The organization doesn't like to lobby. It doesn't like to be political, but it also doesn't let anyone know we exist. [Working on an initiative to get concert tickets for gold star moms, participant started posting in different groups.] Beyond the people I know that I personally met in the organization, nobody else in these groups knew there was a group [GSMO]. It doesn't surprise me. We don't do anything about it. We do no social media. We do nothing. Even if we did, once a week, talk about a gold star family or highlight a gold star family. We have done nothing in our organization to make our organization aware. I'll take the PR because I think it makes people google it and maybe another family hears about it and realizes they know a gold star family from it. – Natalie

Raising awareness of gold star families helps in legacy work and identity construction. There is a meaning and a status behind being a gold star mother. More recognition might mean fewer grocery store conflicts over a license plate. It might mean

not having to educate as many people on the basics of the definition and more time to focus on the legacy work. For participants, being a gold star mother means loss but it also means service and telling their child's story. Through this work, they keep their child socially alive and maintain their legacy. This legacy work, for most, becomes intricately woven into their identity as mother.

Outside of Gold Star Families, this research yields insight into the embeddedness of national and organizational discourses in terms of identity construction, loss, and complicated grief. Future research may compare this to experiences of loss and organizational influences for families of cancer loss, suicide loss, mass shootings, drive by, police brutality, and any area where grief is felt and expressed. For example, we see similar breaking news cycles, media coverage, community spectacle, and grief politics regarding school shootings. Drone footage of the school in question is aired as reports are slowly released on the situation. As soon as parents are notified, the national, local, and social media platforms blast the victims' names and faces. Public stories are crafted regarding who these victims were and what their final moments were like. Grieving families are reached out to for comment, potentially brought onto some televised stage or interview, and used as political talking points. Survivors and families may even be invited to the White House for a politics of grief discussion where cameras are present but legislature is not passed (Vitali 2018). Future research should address the preponderance of grief politics and grief spectacle outside of the context of gold star families.

When considering how to respond to tragedies and news of loss of life, the media has some changes to make if it wants to be humane. Ideally, media would wait until

families are notified before reporting to mitigate any unnecessary distress. Care should inform reporting strategies. Reporting images of downed helicopters, chaotic scenes, and flashing death toll numbers draw in the viewer who often has difficulty grappling with the reality and gravity of the loss of a human being. Victims become a number and easy marks to sensationalize grief and tragedy. Our current breaking news spectacle dehumanizes victims, thrusts families into a premature panic and grief that can add its own trauma to families regardless of whether they indeed lost a child that day or not. Those whose children survived may still find themselves in a distressed and psychologically damaging state for hours before hearing whether their child is a survivor or a victim. Families of victims may hear the news after hours of emotionally distressed limbo, adding additional damage to their already emotionally exhaustive selves. To be clear, losing a child is going to cause trauma, damage, pain, hurt. But, we can and should reduce harm as much as possible.

Breaking news also risks younger family members, such as younger siblings or the deceased's children, learning new information before their family can decide how and what to share, thus breaching a privacy boundary. In the case of familial death, parents often craft their own disclosure rules before telling children about a loss (Toller and McBryde 2013). They may include specific information left out or framing information in particular ways such as through a religious lens. If a child learns from the media before the parent, it may add unnecessary turbulence to the family. It may be easy to have a knee jerk reaction against families allowing children to watch the news during this time. However, we must keep in mind that the family's world has been shaken and they are inundated with the most difficult information and decisions. Breaking news may also

occur before a parent can pick up a child or prevent a child from seeing the news. Media should wait until families have been notified and families should have a say in whether they want images or videos of their child's final moments televised.

Studies find that good casualty assistance officers can positively effect a grieving family's experience by providing clarity, support, and resources (Bartone, 1996; Ender and Hermsen 1996). However, the quality and experience of casualty assistance officers varied for participants. Some benefitted from present officers and others were left feeling lost and unsupported. The military may look at more consistent training and resources. In addition, the military branches should also consider issuing a trained public relations counselor for each family, especially for high profile cases. The transitions in parenting, reality of losing a child, planning, scheduling, coping, communicating, all weigh heavily in those first few days and weeks after the knock on the door. Having a PR agent to field the numerous calls and requests from the media as well as for the dissemination of information such as funeral arrangements would allow families more time and mental space to focus on the more immediate matters at hand – namely grieving, arranging, surviving. A PR agent would also have expert knowledge of press releases, how public statements may be spun, and how to best protect the grieving family during a very chaotic and surreal period.

One aspect of gold star mothers not addressed above was their experiences comforting their child's battle buddies. More than a few had stories of meeting the returning troop at the airport or attending an event to show support. A few mothers described battle buddies approaching them at some point and taking on the blame. "I'm the reason your son died." "It should have been me." Mothers then are left to validate the

feelings and to comfort the battle buddy. This highlights both the emotional complexity and social responsibility placed on mothers and how survivors guilt manifests in returning soldiers. As mentioned in earlier chapters, veteran suicide is high and guilt plays a large part of it. In these interactions, the mother's response has unnecessary weight added to it. They take on the healing and mental health load for their child's surviving service members, rather than Veterans Affairs.

Currently, the Veterans Affairs system is deeply flawed. Many veterans still experience stigma and fear when it comes to seeking help. Some service members worry that seeking help will result in them being removed from their positions, derailed from their career paths, or medically discharged all together. Those who return home may not be ready to seek treatment until years later, providing its own source of discomfort. Long wait times, confusing processes, and feeling dismissed by healthcare providers at the VA also discourage those seeking care and can exacerbate feelings of trauma, anxiety, and even suicidality. While there have been improvements over the years, there is still more work to be done. A centralization of records and a consistency of care and processes would help. Having a clear chain of command when it comes to provider concerns and issues would give patients and their families more autonomy and a sense of more control. Because of the high control nature of the military, there may also be a common fear that speaking back or advocating for oneself will result in a system wide punishment of lower quality care. As high as veteran and service member suicide is, improving the VA healthcare system to empower, assist, treat, and serve veterans and service members should be a top priority.

In this section, I have proposed changes to media, CAS, military, and veterans systems as a form of public sociology. In doing so, I am actively engaging in grief in politics. Through this dissertation, grief has been on display in its own spectacle while simultaneously challenging the use of spectacles of grief.

Advice from GSMs On Experiencing Grief

Due to the cohort nature of the organization, with some members having joined as much as 50 years prior, this may yield some insight or an investigative spring board into better understanding complicated grief. With Covid-19, we are seeing large swaths of people dying, leaving behind loved ones facing traumatic and sudden loss. While the valor of a military death is not present, the unexpectedness of losing a loved one is. The knock becomes a call or the final exhale of agonal breath.

> I have to tell you this story real fast. I was in the attic going through a box of some of his old things and I found this toothbrush. It was green army camo. He had bought it before he went overseas. It has been in this box for years but I thought…I wonder if it still works. So, I tested it and it did! The batteries are the same. I had to laugh. I said, you aren't here anymore but this old toothbrush still is. And it is still running!" – Bernice

This research also brings attention to the lingering effects of war. Gold star families do not vanish after the cameras leave. They continue each day, clinging to what they have of their child, and to living life without them.

I end this project here with a glimpse at what participants wish people understood about grief.

1) It does not end.
2) One does not get over it. They learn to live with it.
3) It is okay to grieve.
4) Don't do it (grieve) alone.

5) You will have good days and bad days.
6) Don't hold the grief back. The more you do the worse it feels.
7) You have to believe you never know the time or place that one will die.
8) Find gratitude in the time you did have. It doesn't take the pain away but can help.
9) It is okay to seek therapy.
10) Find joy in the memories when you can.
11) Have faith (if religious).

Lastly, a quote about living with grief from Monica.

> I am going to go back and quote my counselor. "I just want you to know you are not here to talk about Eric." I remember raging. What do you mean? I'm here to talk about my son. He said, "There's nothing I can do to bring back your son. What I can do is teach you how to live your life without your son. This is all about you." And I was furious. I thought no, I need to talk to somebody about Eric. But now, he's a genius. It's like everything in life. We are all dealt a deck of cards. How you learn to deal with everything makes it easier for how you learn to deal with the next thing. Is it easy? No. Is it going to go away? No. Have I thought about committing suicide? Absolutely. There's crazy emotions. But he would have me, "tell me what it is going to be like going to a baseball game with Eric no longer there. Tell me how you are going to react when you smell Eric's favorite food." I did not really like this but he's smarter than I am and I think it really helped. Still to this day, if I smell cheese pizza, I think at the moment, "Oh my God, Eric loved cheese pizza." Or, I could think, "Oh my God. My son was killed and I want to crawl in a hole." It's how you take these moments. They are not going to go away. I could either be depressed and crawl in a hole or I can be blessed and think I'm so lucky. I'm so lucky to have that memory with that child.

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VITA

I was born in rural West Tennessee. I graduated with my bachelor's degree from Bethel University in 2011. I briefly worked as a family advocate for child abuse prevention where I performed case management with families reintegrated from the foster care system and families where non parental relatives were taking custody of relative children. This also involved facilitating support groups for child abuse survivors ages 5 – 18 and for relative caregivers. In 2014, I earned my Master's degree in Sociology at the University of Memphis with my thesis research on non-suicidal self-injury. Some of that work is published in the journal of deviant behavior and as chapters in the books "Researching Social Problems", and "Advances in Autoethnography and Narrative Inquiry". I also served as an assistant on a research team focusing on suicide talk and reddit.

While a graduate student at the University of Missouri, I served as President for the Sociology Graduate Student Group, President for the Women and Gender Studies Graduate Group, co-organized the University wide conference for Women and Gender Studies, served on the organizing committee for the 2017 Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction's conference in Montreal Canada, organized and facilitated the pedagogy reading group, lead a theory reading group, was treasurer for the Graduate Student Association and reviewed and awarded organizational grants in that capacity. I also served as a graduate mentor to incoming students and as an alumni mentor to graduate students at the University of Memphis. I presented, presided, and organized sessions at numerous regional, national, and international conferences. I volunteered for the Heart of America marathon as an aide station attendant and for The Mustard Seed

which is a clothing closet for low income individuals in Milan, TN. In fall of 2015, I completed a personal feat of successfully finishing a half marathon.

My passion is in teaching sociology and helping students critically think about their social worlds and the institutions within them. I take a compassionate approach recognizing students as whole persons and not just vessels to fill with information. I care about the whole wellbeing of a student and meet them where they are at. Inspired by Victor Rios, I attempt to empower student's own stories in my classes and emphasize an interactive group learning environment where each individual in the class has an opportunity to learn from others.

I am married to an incredibly supportive spouse who is my best friend, co-parent, a writer, artist, veteran, and gold star sibling. Nic keeps me positive, encouraged, and focused. Together, we have a toddler named Atlas. He was born 11 weeks early and I juggled teaching, research, interviews with gold star mothers, and NICU life for two months before bringing him home. I hope he looks at his mother's work one day and recognizes that he can do incredible things even if they feel impossible in the moment.

Researching gold star mothers while struggling with infertility, a life threatening childbirth, spending months in the NICU, and bringing home this teeny tiny baby shifted my perspective. When I began the project, I knew gold star mothers. I was familiar with the organization. I had previous experience interviewing people who had emotionally difficult stories involving self-injury, suicidality, and child abuse. I had already heard a few gold star stories and was not worried about their emotional impact. Once I held my son for the first time, I gained a deeper understanding of parenting expectations, fears,

anxieties, and love. For the first time, I cried re-listening to some of their stories. I would find myself begging in my heart for my child's safety. Then while writing and editing the dissertation, my grandmother who helped raise me passed away. I remember writing the memorial at the manor scene around that time and the significance of loss and aged mortality resonated on a different level than in the previous times where I sat in on those ceremonies. One thing I want to be clear in this work is that while we critique and analyze institutions, organizations, discourses, and the like, that these are also real people with real loss. The science is valuable *and* I do not want the humanity to become lost in the critical.