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Former Waynesburg resident publishes children's book

By:Elizabeth Witte



HERSHEY - As a member of a strong military family, Deanna Cole wanted to share her strength with other families.

Wanting to offer support to others dealing with the stress of having a deployed service member in the family, Cole - a former Waynesburg resident who now lives in Hershey - wrote a book for children.

"I Am Red, White, & Blue...Are You Feeling It Too?" was published in May of 2008 by Cole through her Web site, StrongMilitaryFamilies.com.

The 32-page book tells a story of hope and endurance through the eyes of a child who is coping after a loved one is deployed on an unnamed mission.

The story hits close to home for Cole, whose husband, Shane, is a Sergeant First Class in the Pennsylvania Army National Guard and who was deployed

to Iraq in January of 2005.

At that time, the Cole family was living in Waynesburg, and Cole was leading the local Family Readiness Group to support other local military families.

As the holiday season was drawing to a close that January after Shane had left, Cole found herself and their four children - Molly, 17, Alexis, 16, Larissa, 13, and Sawyer, 8 - struggling to cope in his absence.

After a particularly stressful day, Cole had her children sit down to draw and discuss their feelings about their father's deployment.

"All of a sudden, I kind of looked at Molly and said, 'You know what, we really kind of learned a lot through all of this,'" Cole said. "I said, 'You know what we should do for fun? Why don't we come up with some ideas to help other families in the FRG group?'"

Initially, Cole and her children decided to put together a newsletter, but when they realized they had far too much material, they decided to produce a children's book instead.

"So from there, we just kind of started, and that whole weekend turned around for us," Cole said. "I started penning some ideas, and Molly started designing some ideas for the cover and started giving me ideas for artwork. And each of the kids had ideas to say about it, so that kind of was the inspiration. We just put our thoughts and minds on the table, and it grew from there."

After developing the concept of the book, Cole said the title was inspired by a red, white and blue Christmas ornament displayed on her tree.

"I came across an ornament that said '100% Military Mom,'" Cole said. "And I was looking at that, and we were all talking about what should we title our children's book. It was from looking at that ornament and just seeing '100% Military Mom,' for some reason, we just kind of played with it, and it grew from there."

During the summer of 2005, Cole said she finished writing the book while volunteering at Operation Purple Camp, sponsored by the National Military Family Association for children with a deployed parent.

The camp inspired Cole to not only re-imagine the book as a letter from one of the campers, but it also gave her the idea to take proceeds from the book sales to help support the camps.

After camp, Cole admits she did not do more with the book until the summer of 2006, when Shane returned home. He immediately began helping her with the storyboards for the book throughout the rest of that year, and in February of 2007, Cole said she and Molly spent three months researching potential artists and artwork.

"In a matter of one e-mail and 24 hours later, we hired Jacqueline McQuade," Cole said of the London-based artist. "We shot her an e-mail, and...in 24 hours, she gave me an idea for what she wanted to do for the artwork, which was beyond what I'd already expected. A couple days after that, we had all the sketches. I had all pencil

sketches of the artwork for the book, and I fell in love with it. She took it exactly where I could have never dreamed where it was going to go. Then I got all the artwork in paintings by April, and Mother's Day weekend was so significant because I remember that's when I got all the artwork."

Earlier this year, Cole started researching printers, and by May, the book was published. The following month, in June, Cole launched StrongMilitaryFamilies.com.

"Shane and I sat for many nights in a row with sketch ideas and tried to come up with how we wanted the Web site to look and where we wanted the Web site to go," Cole said. "Because right now, it's in the growing stages. We have so much we want to do with it. We just wanted to come up with a name that could be open to any branch, really, not any one in particular. We wanted everyone who's military to feel comfortable in that. So all of a sudden, we just kind of looked at each other and had all these ideas, and that one just kind of stuck."

The book is currently available through Cole's site and Amazon.com, and Cole estimates she has sent out 300 copies since May.

"Every week, I get orders," Cole said. "They trickle in from Amazon, and they trickle in from the Web site. So I'm at the post office every week. And it grows."

"It's not easy," she added. "Selling a book is not something that you can just do and think it's an overnight thing. It's hard work. From its conception in 2005 to now, almost fall of 2008, it's been hard work, every bit of it."

The most rewarding part for Cole, however, was when she let her family know that their names were also on the book cover as contributors.

"For me, my most favorite thing of all...was giving one to each of my kids, giving one to my husband," Cole said.

"None of my family knew that I was adding their names to the book until they saw the proof. They were such a huge part of it. Definitely their heart went into this."

Keeping her days busy working to support other military families, Cole said knowing that her book is helping others marks its greatest success.

"I really, really wanted any child or child at heart to be able to read the book and connect," she said. "So it was really important for the kids and I that when we wrote the book and the concept, when it was being developed, we wanted to be able to reach all children, whether you are a child or a child at heart."