

In May, CC Santa Fe Springs, CA, hosted a festival designed to celebrate the lives of fallen soldiers, honor families for their sacrifice, and proclaim the Gospel in their community. The event, called *A Day to Honor*, commemorated 19 Americans fallen in combat. One mother honored there has attended CC Chino Hills, CA, for nearly two decades. She later reflected on her family's story—and her son's death in Iraq at age 19.

# Honoring the Families of the Fallen

Story by Debra Smith  
Photos by Jason Joseph

*“Honor all people. ... Fear God.”* 1 Peter 2:17a



Lance Corporal Abe Simpson, USMC, 19

Memorial Day

“At times I doubted myself, wondering if God could really use me,” said Maria Simpson, recalling the days before her oldest son Abe was killed in Fallujah, Iraq. “My life had been so easy. Both my parents were still living; our family hadn’t had cancer or some other tragedy. Sometimes I questioned, *What will be my hard thing in life? Will I be able to meet that challenge?*”

On November 10, 2004, Maria looked up and saw three crisply-dressed Marines approaching her house. “My sister was there at the time, and my middle son, David,” she said. “As we saw them coming, my breath shortened and my heart started racing—the beginning of shock, I suppose. David disappeared and walked around the neighborhood for three hours. But God had prepared us months earlier, when six Marines were killed in Abe’s region. My husband and I realized then, ‘Abe could be among them, and we wouldn’t even know it until they appeared on our doorstep.’ I worked through a lot of emotions at that time. I remember writing in my journal, praying a lot, and asking myself, *If that happened to Abe, would I blame God? How would I react?* I wanted my response to honor the Lord. I didn’t want to deny His goodness.”

As the men came in and stated the news, “I was astounded, thinking, *He’s in God’s presence,*” Maria said. “*He’s been before God and we didn’t even know it.* My goal in raising my kids was that they would one day be with God—and Abe had reached that goal,” she added, through tears. The night before, Maria had hosted a work party to create care packages for Abe and fellow Marines. “Stuff from that project was scattered all over the living room,” she said. Sitting amidst these tangible reminders of her son, Maria realized, *This is my hard thing. God is giving me this opportunity. I can seek to bring Him glory in it, or hide in a shell.* “God had not been waiting to zap me with calamity,” she clarified. “That’s not His character. But He does call all of us to honor and serve Him—regardless of what happens.” So, surrounded by remnants of packages that would never reach Abe, Maria asked herself, *Can I minister to these Marines who have come to give me the news? Can I encourage them and point them to the Lord?* “I think the best way to deal with any situation God gives us,” Maria later said, “is to ask how we can serve God in it. This was my opportunity.”

***In all this Job did not sin nor charge God with wrong.***

Job 1:22



“Only God Himself understands your pain,” responded Pastor Pancho Juarez of CC Montebello, CA, after he and his wife Millie, center, learned Maria Simpson lost a son and a nephew fighting in Iraq. Maria was honored, along with other families who have lost loved ones

at the *A Day to Honor* event at CC Santa Fe Springs, CA. Maria’s family has attended CC Chino Hills for nearly 20 years.

*“I want to be in the infantry so I can take a bullet for someone who doesn’t know the Lord.”*

Lance Corporal Abe Simpson



**Honoring Their Sacrifice**

CC Santa Fe Springs’ *A Day to Honor* Memorial Day festival recognized 19 families of soldiers fallen in Iraq, Afghanistan, and previous conflicts.



Pastor Ray Loo

“Our desire was twofold,” said Pastor Ray Loo of the Southern California church. “We wanted to honor God by hosting a free event where the community could hear the Gospel, and—in obedience to the command in 1 Peter 2:17 to ‘Honor all people’—to honor families who have lost loved ones in battle.” The afternoon community outreach involved concerts, food, and children’s features, such as face-painting, balloon animals, and puppets. Ministries also set up booths, including abortion recovery, Christ-centered cancer support, and drug rehabilitation centers. Then during an evening tribute, gold-star families were encouraged, presented with the Gospel, and recognized with a plaque honoring their sacrifice.

Gold-star families, Maria explained, are those who have lost an immediate family member in combat. The expression originated during World War II, when people hung a blue star in their window for each loved one fighting abroad. Upon a service member’s death, the symbol was replaced with a gold star. Though Maria and her husband Jim have attended other ceremonies honoring gold-star families, “This was the first I know of sponsored by a church,” she said. “At other events, people sometimes allude to their faith; but at this one, the Gospel was shared openly ... how great to reach out specifically to gold-star families in the name of Christ.”

Pastor Pancho Juarez of CC Montebello, CA, spoke at the tribute. He later said, “As a former Marine myself, it was a privilege to meet and provide some tangible comfort to these gold-star parents and other family

members who have lost a loved one. It is too easy to overlook the incredible sacrifices service families have endured as our country continues to engage in battle on two simultaneous warfronts.”

Being gold-star parents, Maria said, provides the Simpsons with unique opportunities to share the Gospel. “Abe’s testimony opens doors for us. He was one of the guys, which gives us an opening with Marines—and we use that to tell them about the hope we have in Christ.” The family had ministered to Abe’s comrades all along: “A few Marines from his platoon used to stay with us on weekends while they were stationed at Camp Pendleton, CA,” Maria said. “They became regular attendees of CC Chino Hills, and two of them married girls from the church.”

Abe, the oldest of three, dreamed from childhood of being a Marine. In the youth group at CC Chino Hills, Maria said, “He struggled as a teen, like many. I prayed for him and asked others from the church to join me. God touched his heart on a mission trip during his junior year of high school.” Abe soon joined an evangelism class at CC Chino Hills. “It awakened his spirit and prompted him in his own walk with the Lord,” Maria remarked. “That was a delight for me. I remember when he came home after talking with the youth pastor, who asked whether he had prayed about joining the Marines. Abe said that was a new concept to him. It was neat to see him beginning to commit his ways to the Lord.”

**A Quiet Servant**

CC Chino Hills, a megachurch today, was just 300 strong when the Simpsons began attending in 1991. Pastor Jack Hibbs said he knows Jim and Maria closely and watched their sons grow up—“Abe was probably in kindergarten the first time my wife and I had dinner at their table,” he said. “The entire family are Christ-centered servants. They get involved and do whatever needs to be done. ... It is amazing the way the power

of that couple’s witness percolated down into their boys’ lives.”

Abe was particularly quiet and servant-minded, Jack said. “When I first heard he was going on a mission trip, I thought, What’s he going to do with his mouth? He rarely talked! But when he did, everybody would shut up and listen—and gems fell out of his mouth. We found him to be incredibly effective in ministry.”

After finishing high school and enlisting as a Marine in August 2003, “Abe sent us a text saying he was being assigned to Fallujah,” Maria recalled. “My heart sank. Until that point, he’d been training; but then it hit me—he’ll be in harm’s way.” Abe was deployed to Iraq in June 2004. Two weeks later, Maria said, “He wrote to us saying he had shared the Gospel with everyone in his platoon.”

Abe served for one year and two months until his death in Fallujah on November 9, 2004. In planning for his funeral, Jack said, “We as a church completely underestimated the public’s response to Abe’s influence.” CC Chino Hills’ 3,000-seat sanctuary could not hold all the attendees; afterward, California’s Department of Transportation shut down two freeways for the procession to the cemetery. The 27-mile route passed under numerous overpasses where fire trucks sat

parked with lights flashing and flags flown. “Police and fire personnel were standing overtop saluting,” Jack said, tearing up. “The local news helicopter estimated the motorcade to be eight miles long. And there was a military flyover. ... It’s exactly like Jesus said.”

**“Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain.”** John 12:24b

“That’s a common verse when we talk about Abe, because his death brought about an awakening in our church,” Jack continued. “The influence he has had, the fruit of his life and death, is incredible.” One Navy Corpsman later gave Maria his Navy ring, which is similar in significance to a class ring. He explained that he wanted her to have it “because he said Abe had such a deep spiritual impact on his life,” Maria recalled.

The only American killed in the incident, Abe had just switched places with another Marine when a grenade hit him directly. In a way, Maria said, it was exactly what Abe would have wanted: “That evangelism class had so solidified his faith that he was very aware of his position in Christ. He had said, ‘If anything happens to anyone, it’d be best if it’s me. I know where I’m going; they need

the time. I want to be in the infantry so I can take a bullet for someone who doesn’t know the Lord.”

Two years afterward, Abe’s cousin Jonathan Simpson, 25, was killed in Iraq. Abe’s youngest brother Paul, 22, is currently deployed to Afghanistan, serving with Abe’s very platoon.

**CC Santa Fe Springs, CA**  
[www.ccsfs.com](http://www.ccsfs.com)  
[admin@ccsfs.com](mailto:admin@ccsfs.com)  
 562-906-0697



The mother, left, and cousin of a fallen soldier receive a commemorative plaque in honor of the young man’s sacrifice. He was 18 when he was killed in Vietnam.



Christian musicians The Katinas, along with a color guard and presentation of the Marine Corps flag, open CC Santa Fe Springs’ *A Day to Honor* tribute to fallen soldiers.