

Guess who's coming to dinner? Navy family starts unique deployment ritual



Courtesy of Andrea Hand Photography

Sarah Smiley with, clockwise, Ford, 11, Lindell, 5 and Owen, 9.

By Rebecca Ruiz

Sarah Smiley knew her husband's deployment was going to be hard.

Dustin, a Navy pilot, would be gone in the Middle East for 13 months.

Smiley, 35, thought about the coming loneliness. When Dustin had previously deployed in 2001 and 2003, the couple's first two sons were young, and Sarah contended only with her own sadness. Now Ford, Owen and Lindell, ages 11, 9 and 5, know what it means to miss their father.

Dustin's absence would always be there, but Smiley knew that one daily activity would remind them more than others. "I knew from past deployments that dinner time is the worst," she said. "It's lonely because you don't have all of your family. I remember those being sad times."

Smiley, who is an author and syndicated columnist, came up with a novel idea: instead of face her husband's empty chair at dinnertime, she decided to invite a guest to sit in his place once a week. And with that began "Dinner with the Smileys," a 52-week affair that will end when Dustin returns home in December.

The inaugural dinner at the family's Bangor, Maine, home kicked off on Jan. 3 with a distinguished guest, Sen. Susan Collins (R-Maine). Ford invited her in a letter that read in part, "My mom is letting us invite one person to dinner each week our dad is gone. We are wondering if you would like to come to dinner some time this year (which is stretching it quite a bit but my mom insisted that we be flexible)."

Collins showed up to dinner with a plate of homemade brownies.

The senator has been the highest-profile guest to date, though Smiley says the White House contacted her earlier this year. Ford invited both the president and vice president. The Smileys would bend the rules of having only two guests, he said, and make room for the president's wife and daughters if they wanted to come.



Courtesy Andrea Hand Photography

Lindell, 5, unwraps a brownie that his preschool teacher brought to dinner.

In May, retired Major League Baseball player Matt Stairs, who lives in Maine, will have dinner with the family. Smiley has invited the author Stephen King, a Maine native, to dine as well. The conductor who performed the Star Wars score live with the Boston Pops will join the family this Sunday, April 29.

Most of the guests, however, have not been famous. The Smileys have hosted the boys' teachers, their minister and his wife, anchors from a local TV station, and, separately, Bangor's mayor and chief of police.

Dinner No. 17, held on April 22, left the greatest impression on Smiley so far. The family was scheduled to eat with an elderly neighbor who had recently moved into an assisted living facility, but she passed away before the dinner. The boys decided they wanted to spend the evening at the facility and they ate with their friend's neighbors, including a resident who has memory problems. The woman was accompanied by her husband, though she didn't recall that they were married.

"That dinner was very rich because we were with a lot of people who were missing someone," Smiley told msnbc.com. "It helps the kids to see there are a lot of people who are lonely."

As of January 2011, there were 1.9 million children with a parent serving in the military; 220,000 of those children had a deployed parent.

Dr. Catherine Mogil, director of training at the [FOCUS project](#), which provides family resiliency training at military installations across the U.S. and in Japan, says Smiley's unique idea can help the family cope with Dustin's deployment.

Mogil says Smiley's dinnertime ritual is a way of helping the boys keep track of time, which can be particularly hard for younger children. Marking the passage of time in weekly increments can be more manageable than ticking days off the calendar, Mogil says. She's known families that have created similar rituals, including a weekly ice cream outing. At home, the family will post a paper cut-out of an ice cream cone and add another scoop after each outing. At the end of the deployment, the returning parent puts a cherry on top.

The weekly dinner also strengthens the bonds the Smiley boys have with caring adults, Mogil says. "Making those connections is one of the big protective resilience factors. The more people that she invites that are in their community, she's really strengthening their network."

Though military families may feel adjusted to deployments, Commander Wanda Finch, a family and community program manager at the Defense Centers of Excellence for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury, says the strains of an absent parent are many. The constant worrying about a loved one's well-being can lead to anxiety, stress and depression. Families can cope with those feelings in a number of ways, including maintaining rituals and keeping in close contact with the deployed parent. That might include e-mailing and Skyping as well as leaving signed cards for birthdays or recordings of bedtime stories.



Courtesy Andrea Hand Photography

University of Maine Men's Hockey Coach Tim Whitehead, who joined the Smileys for dinner no. 7.

"It's an example of how family rituals can be embellished to provide ongoing support a parent may need to tap into in the absence of their spouse," Finch said of the Smiley's dinner project.

For Sarah, that support has come in multiple forms. During her husband's previous deployments, she often felt isolated. Now she looks forward to the adult company once a week. When her basement recently flooded, some of the recent dinner guests rallied to help Smiley clean up the mess.

The dinners also give Dustin comfort. "It makes him feel his absence is more present," Smiley said. "They know what our family is going through."

The Smileys, who are documenting their dinners on [Facebook](#), will hold a 53rd dinner when Dustin returns in December. She also plans to reunite all of her dinner guests at a gathering next year.

“I started to realize that [Dustin] was missing a lot,” Smiley said. “Once he gets settled, I’m going to have a big party here and invite all of our guests to come and meet him.”

Rebecca Ruiz is a reporter at msnbc.com and a 2011-2012 Rosalynn Carter Mental Health Journalism Fellow.