Being A Gold Star Parent Is Not Awesome (An Educational Piece)

I’m going to be as short as I can be. Promise. Let me first say, I’m an army veteran. I was trained to fight, but never was called up during my active duty service. I’ve been told by those who’ve been in the heat of battle that it was probably a blessing. I believe them.

Please know, the past few years have been extremely rewarding for me. I’ve met dozens of real combat veterans with compelling stories about the horrors of armed conflict. Their stories of duty and valor have touched my soul. I’ve gotten acquainted with several “veteran-focused” organizations offering badly-needed services to veterans and their families suffering from the aftermath of wartime trauma. Their important work motivates me. I’ve been honored to meet and serve businesses that care about veterans, active duty military and their families. I am going to work hard to build commerce for them.

But perhaps, the most rewarding and emotional experiences I’ve had lately is the privilege of meeting several Gold Star mothers and fathers, people who’ve paid the ultimate sacrifice by losing a son or a daughter in combat. I may not always show it, but my heart always grieves whenever I’m around them. I cannot even imagine the pain of losing a child.

My personal interactions with Gold Star parents have given me some useful insight and an opportunity. Understand, I certainly mean no disrespect to anybody when I write about this subject, but it needs to be told. What I’ve witnessed usually happens when a Gold Star parent is being introduced to others. I’ve seen high fives and congratulatory handshakes. I’ve heard words like “awesome” and “cool” spoken with heartfelt enthusiasm. “Wow, sweet, and nice” are other words I’ve often heard. It is odd for those of us who understand what a Gold Star means to see these exchanges. They always make me feel uncomfortable. The reactions of the Gold Star parents crush me every time. I’ve seen a look of extreme pain, sometimes total shock on the faces of the grieved parents. Something is amiss. But, we can change that with some openness.

I truly believe education and empathy are the keys here. If we can learn what a Gold Star really means, we can help spread the word about it and make a real difference in the healing process of our Gold Star parents, our fellow human beings. So, if you are ever introduced to a Gold Star mother or father, just tell them how sorry you are for the tragic loss of their child. That’s all. Believe me, that will go much further than an uneducated “attaboy” or “good job.”

With all due respect, thank you for reading.