



## A lifeline for families of wounded

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Liz Kelm didn't want to visit the Soldier and Family Assistance Center at first.

The Wyanet, Ill., mother, whose son Dustin Hill is being treated at Brooke Army Medical Center, is temporarily living on post so she can visit and take care of him every day.

Stocked with a big-screen television, computers with Internet access, books, magazines, fresh-baked goods and coffee, the assistance center sounded like too much to deal with.

Now, she can't imagine life without it — or Judith Markelz, the center's whirlwind coordinator.

"Judith is such a lifesaver," Kelm said. "She helps us with everything we need. She takes us to lunch, to get our nails done; she took two busloads of soldiers and their families to a play last week. If she doesn't know the answer, she'll find it."

As the Army's premier medical facility, BAMC is treating more than 280 injured and burned soldiers from Iraq. The most recent patients include those injured last week in the suicide attack on the mess tent in Mosul.

With advances in battlefield medicine and personnel, 89 percent of all casualties in Iraq are coming home, according to Col. Richard Agee, chief of staff at the Medical Center and School.

As these soldiers recover, many mothers, wives and families drop everything to be with their loved ones. For mothers like Kelm and Sue Meisner, whose son James Wilson is recovering from burns over 49 percent of his body, it means hours a day in the hospital.

They do more than just visit. Kelm and Meisner have chosen to become involved with their sons' care: helping with physical therapy, changing dressings, and just being there as the young men come to grips with their new reality.

In Dustin's case, that new reality means life without a right eye and his right hand, missing fingers on his left hand, and burns covering a third of his body. He was the victim of a car bombing in September.

When she's not with Dustin, Kelm is with Meisner, and the two are often at the assistance center, drinking coffee and chatting with Markelz. All of the women support each other.

"I try to make life a little easier for soldiers and their families," said Markelz, an energetic woman with bright blue eyes. A photo of her juggling two cell phones sits on her desk.

She gestures around the three-room center — at the videos, the TV, the computers, and the trays and trays of Christmas goodies.

"Everything you see here? It's all donated by the community," she said. "This community really supports this center. It's just amazing."

Markelz says getting families and recovering soldiers off the base when she can is her most important job.

"Something like normal life returns, even if just for a few hours."

As she speaks, a woman walks hesitantly through the door. Markelz takes charge, offering her a ream of brochures, paperwork and a cup of hot coffee.

Kerry Dauphinee, a volunteer at the center, also works with soldiers and their families — hooking them up with video conferencing. Anyone in town with family deployed anywhere overseas in support of the war in Iraq is eligible for this free service.

"The best way to get in touch with me is through email," he said. That address is [Kerry.dauphinee@samhouston.army.mil](mailto:Kerry.dauphinee@samhouston.army.mil).

Those interested in donating to the Soldier and Family Assistance Center may do so by calling Markelz at 241-0811.

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Online at: <http://www.mysanantonio.com/news/metro/stories/MYSA122604.1B.BAMCwounded.428597bc.html>