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News

War's new wave of sing parents

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Staff Reporter

Two-year-old Jaddius Curry wandered out of bed and into his parents' bedroom.

"Daddy? Where's my mommy?" he said to a sleeping Cortez Curry.

"She's at work," Dad answered from his pillow.

Jaddius climbed into bed with him, tearful and sleepy. His 3-year-old, Ayrian, and 4-year-old, Daidren, followed. They've been there every night since.

Like a growing number of women, Army National Guard Spc. Zatavia Curry's military duty has pulled her away from her family, leaving her household solely in the care of her husband, Cortez. With 200,000 active duty women in the U.S. armed forces, the number of civilian men left at home is more common than ever.

Shelley MacDermid, co-director of the Military Family Research Institute at Purdue University, said fathers left behind by military wives deal with the same separation anxieties as mothers left by their military husbands.

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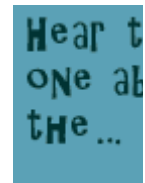
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Socially, this small but growing group of men is often more alone with fewer support systems than are available to their female counterparts. But when men take on the mantle of both mother and father for a while, they often pave the way for stronger relationships with their children, MacDermid said.

For 28-year-old Cortez Curry, being a single, working dad while his wife is called up into active duty means the white laundry has turned pink. It's meant the 3-year-old has gone to day care with sometimes lopsided pigtails. It's meant grandma's house is a great place for dinnertime. And it's meant Cortez Curry is heartsick.

"I kind of hate coming home because I know she's not here," he said, one eye on cable news and one eye on his children playing on the porch. "You never know what you've got'til it's gone."

The separation has just begun for the Currys, married seven years.

Though Zatavia Curry was sent to Fort Benning in Georgia two months ago, she was just deployed with the 226th Area Support Group last Tuesday for a war assignment that the family's been told could last a year.

"I haven't heard anything since she left," Cortez said.

Learning to be Mr. Mom:

Things Cortez Curry has learned:

"Feed them one at a time. Dress them one at a time. Do not wash the reds with the whites," he said with a grin.

Feed the three dogs. Make sure the fish are eating. And don't forget the two turtles.

Put a hold on fixing people's cars, his longtime hobby. Right now, all there's time for after working weekdays as a foreman at McPhillips Manufacturing is picking up the children and watching the children.

When Jaddius cries with an earache at night, pull him close and rock him like mommy does. Take Ayrian to her aunt to get her hair fixed. Make sure the teeth are brushed before going to school.

"I'm learning to get this down," Cortez said, hugging Jaddius tight and patting him on the back after the toddler came to him with a hurt finger.

Cortez said he feels he understands his children now more than ever.

"In many families, moms are kind of gatekeepers to children so that the kinds of relationships dads have with their kids may depend a lot on the opportunities that moms set up," MacDermid said. "The great opportunity in a situation like this is that dads have an opportunity to develop their own unique relationship with their children."

Strains of war and waiting:

His heart dropped to his stomach the day they got the phone message: Zatavia Curry was on alert to be activated any day.

"She told me, 'You can't change this. I'm going in, and that's my job,'" Cortez Curry said.

The two of them met in a mechanical drawing class at Mobile's Williamson High School years ago. He was class of 1994. She was in the class of 1996.

They used to tease and play-hit each other around a little, he said. But it wasn't until a few years after he graduated that they would finally start dating, then get married.

By then, Zatavia had already signed up for military service. She hoped to go to college one day, and the military was a surefire way to be able to pay for it. Today, Zatavia's college hopes still are real, but the wartime service has altered how she sees the future.

When she departed Mobile on Feb. 13, the day before Valentine's Day, she said she was more fearful of leaving her babies than she was of war.

"Right now, I guess it hasn't hit me because I haven't left the country," Zatavia Curry said in a phone conversation a week before leaving. Now that she's gone, the truth of her wartime mission has sunk in even more for Cortez.

Even with the outcome more and more clearly showing the Americans as victorious, Cortez said he fears her proximity to continued violence. The television images of war have been unsettling, but somehow he can't stop watching.

The week of March 24, the stories of lost fathers started to headline the news coverage. The day the news broke that a Mobile-area Army serviceman, Howard Johnson II, was killed, Cortez sat in his living room and watched a reporter interview the wife of another lost military man, a Marine. A picture of the family closed the story, a tiny child in front of a mother and a dad.

Cortez said nothing.

The week of April 1, things were looking a little better for the United States. Cortez was taking hope in the progress. "It's letting up," he said. "In about two weeks, I hope it's all over with."

Days, nights and when it's over:

The days are long.

Wake at 4:30 a.m. Dress the children. Take them to day care. Go to work.

Throughout the day, Zatavia and Cortez Curry play on their cell phones, sending text messages back and forth. "I'm talking to my wife," he tells his coworkers when they ask.

The distance has made Cortez understand more about his wife, her responsibilities and her charms -- everything she does in a day without complaint.

He said he can't wait until she comes home for good. He said he wants to make up for all the time he hasn't told her, "Thank you," for her work and her dedication to their family, their children.

"I want to surprise her, take her to Mississippi for a week," he said.

Zatavia said she has female friends in the service who also left children behind. But more often than not, she said, they left them in the care of an aunt or a grandmother. Rarely have they left them with their husbands. It is logic that escapes both Zatavia and Cortez.

"Those are my babies, and I don't want to put them off on no one," Cortez Curry said.

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