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Couple's 'Little Warrior' finds a home in Silver Spring children's center

by Jason Tomassini | Staff Writer

As a career military man, Army 1st Sgt. Todd Landen has had to move his family five times during his 3-year-old daughter Brianna's short life.

At each new home for the Landens, usually a military base, Brianna will quickly make friends, only to be separated shortly after. Her parents say she's too young to fully realize why her father is always on the move but has assumed his transient lifestyle nonetheless.

"With God's help you deal with it," says Aprel Landen, 34, who gave birth to Brianna, the couple's only child, during her husband's second tour of duty in Iraq in 2006.

But for all the uncertainty in Brianna's life, her only concern last week during her child-education class at the Easter Seals Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Inter-Generational Center in Silver Spring was whether she would get to play on the state-of-the-art outdoor playground.

"I like the park," she yells when asked her favorite part of the program.

At that point, she jumps out her chair, leaving her snack of goldfish crackers and milk behind, runs over to the window, perches herself on a wooden chair and stares longingly but excitedly out onto the playground at what awaits her later in the afternoon.

It is only Brianna's fourth day at the center, but her parents say she finally has found a home.

"We didn't want Brianna to be stagnant in development at her age," Todd Landen, 40, said after dropping Brianna off at the center the morning of Nov. 18. "She'll come here and be more active and more talkative. I didn't realize what she could be lacking from my situation."

Earlier this month, Easter Seals began offering free childhood-education programs to families of wounded service members who are being treated at nearby Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C. The children, called "Little Warriors," can attend the regular day care programs at the center, mixing in with children from nonmilitary families, some of whom have developmental disabilities. Five families from Walter Reed are using the program.

"They have an opportunity to be with other kids instead of home alone in a strange place," said Marilyn Ricker, vice president of child-development programs and services at Easter Seals, which provides care and services to adults with disabilities and children up to age 5.



Photo by Rachel Fus/The Gazette
Army 1st Sgt. Todd Landen gets a hug and kiss from his daughter Brianna, 3, as he drops her off at the Easter Seals Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Inter-Generational Center in Silver Spring last week. The center provides free childhood education to families of soldiers who are being treated at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C.

For the Landen family, it is a chance to become integrated into yet another unknown town, their sixth since Brianna was born.

They came to Walter Reed 10 months ago from a base in Fort Drum, N.Y., because Landen aggravated a rib injury that he originally sustained while serving in Bosnia from 1999 to 2000. The rib has since been removed, and six weeks ago he underwent a rare nerve-implant surgery to help his recovery.

He has three to six more months of physical therapy, after which the Landens will be on the move again. Landen, however, will not be going off to war for a fourth time because he is no longer fit to be deployed.

During his last tour in Iraq, Landen's company was hit five separate times with an improvised explosive device. In the final explosion, he sustained a traumatic brain injury and partial memory loss, his wife said. The soft-spoken 17-year Army veteran, who has no visible symptoms from the injury, refers modestly to the incident as a "mild concussion."

The last time Landen went to Iraq, he had just learned his wife was pregnant with Brianna. He was allowed to return home shortly for the birth but still missed the first few months of his daughter's life. When he eventually returned home from his tour, he said he was "an outsider" to family life.

While the father gradually grew closer to his daughter, the Landens were no closer to a normal family life. They moved frequently, and at Walter Reed, Brianna made friends only to see them move away as their fathers or mothers recover from injuries.

"She's a victim of circumstance, unfortunately," said Landen, who is eligible for retirement from the Army in two years.

But no matter when the next move is, in Silver Spring the Landens have some aspects of the family life they have always wanted, which, of course, includes showing off video of how cute their daughter is.

Aprel Landen has cell-phone video footage of Brianna on the playground during her first day at Easter Seals. She is spinning around in a bowl-shaped seat, going faster and faster with every revolution.

It is dizzying, much like the first few years of her life, but she giggles with a wide smile throughout.

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