

Learning Matters, Inc. / 6 E. 32nd St., 8th Floor / New York, NY / 10016
212.725.7000 / news@learningmatters.tv / www.learningmatters.tv

Lessons of War TRANSCRIPT

Airdate: April 5th, 2007

Duration: 13:49 min

Produced by: John Tulenko and Carrie Glasser

JOHN MERROW: For the three children of the Keeling family -- Shelby age 10; Dayton, eight; and Austin, five -- life is about to change. Their father, Corey Keeling, an Army medic, leaves in the morning for the front lines in Afghanistan. It'll be his third duty.

At bedtime, the children's fear comes out.

COREY KEELING: I think they're just now coming into the understanding of the danger. The possibility of death has come up.

JOHN MERROW: How did it come up?

COREY KEELING: Just Austin asked...

JOHN MERROW: What'd you say?

COREY KEELING: What can you say you know? You tell him you'll come home.

Saying goodbye

JOHN MERROW: Early next morning, the Keelings gathered with 350 other soldiers and their families from the 82nd Airborne in Fort Bragg, North Carolina, to say goodbye.

SCARLETTE KEELING: It's really hard on all of us. I don't want them to hurt. You don't want your child to be sad but they have to be strong. I need them to be strong.

JOHN MERROW: Then it is time to go. Staff Sergeant Keeling will be gone on assignment for at least a year.

SCARLETTE KEELING: Everything leaves, his clothes, you know, his shoes, the laundry's gone. It's like he was here and everything was great. And we argued and pinched and poked and drove each other crazy, you know, and it's like, "Oh! If I could just have one more day of that."

JOHN MERROW: A few hours after his father had gone, five-year-old Austin Keeling insisted on going to school.

TIM HOWLE, Principal: Hey, hey, good morning...

JOHN MERROW: There he is greeted by principal Tim Howle, a retired major in the Army Special Forces. Austin's school, McNair Elementary, is located in the middle of Fort Bragg. It's one of 219 schools run by the Department of Defense, with a total enrollment of nearly 100,000 students. Roughly half the students here, 178 children, have a parent overseas in a war zone.

TIM HOWLE: My job is to take care of these kids, take care of the families take care of the teachers. We're the consistency in the lives of these kids.

JOHN MERROW: When Austin arrives at his kindergarten class his teacher, Nancy Welsh, watches him closely.

NANCY WELSH: He's pretty agitated right now. His emotions bother him... He's also tired, you know, it's been a big week for him.

AUSTIN KEELING: I'm sad...

NANCY WELSH: It happens, I know. I get sad sometimes too.

JOHN MERROW: Right away Austin gets a fun assignment, to create a happy dream.

AUSTIN KEELING: I'm going to draw this picture of my dad bouncing.

NANCY WELSH: Your dad bouncing that funny thing you told me about?

Creating a security zone

NANCY WELSH: This is their security zone. This is where they can be a kid. I let them be sad and I even says it's OK to be sad. I would be sad too if my Daddy was far away or I'm sad that your Mommy's not here. So it's ok to be sad but I'll say lets try to feel better now.

JOHN MERROW: Fourteen of the 17 students in Mrs. Welsh's class have a parent serving overseas. At any moment any one of them might need some extra care.

NANCY WELSH: Keyon just came up to me and said I miss Mommy. He just had a very sad look on his face and I said I'm sorry I know you do and I gave him a hug. He hugged me back and held on.

I try to do for every single child what they need. And they don't always need the same thing either.

JOHN MERROW: Before parents deploy, Mrs. Welsh invites them to class for a special visit. Elise's mom is deploying to Iraq tomorrow.

TIM HOWLE: I have made it a point to be personally involved with all the kids. I know what caring and nurturing can do in education. I see it everyday.

JOHN MERROW: Is there a danger that all of this nurturing will get in the way of learning?

TIM HOWLE: No, I believe you can't separate education in relationships. If you want great educational environment, you have to have personal relationship with the kids.

NANCY WELSH: If we just comforted children all day we would never get to the standards that we have to teach. And that wouldn't help the parents to have a child that who is not learning what they have to learn. No we don't lose sight of the academics at all.

JOHN MERROW: Mrs. Welsh uses the children's questions to drive the lessons.

NANCY WELSH: We had a globe and Lauren's father deployed in the fall and she just said 'Where is my daddy?' so I showed her and of course then other people wanted to know, 'Where is my daddy?' And I put up the hot spots of Korea, Iraq and Afghanistan but they're not the only ones we talk about. But they're the ones that mean the most to the children and states where their grandparents or aunts or uncles live.

JOHN MERROW: Nancy Welsh says that all of her students are progressing academically and almost half of them are beginning to read simple sentences. Throughout the day, she uses songs to teach.

NANCY WELSH: I write out the words to songs on big pieces of cardboard then before we sing a song for the first time we read the words.

They get so excited part way through a song there's 'for', there's 'the', Mrs. Welsh it has the word 'he' it has the word 'said' they don't realize I put the songs together intentionally I put all those words in there.

Questions of politics

JOHN MERROW: There are some things they won't learn from her.

NANCY WELSH: My position is to teach the children, to love the children. I'm not a

politician and I'm not someone who expresses opinions about we should be in Afghanistan or Iraq or Korea or anyplace else for that matter. I have such and influence on kindergarteners I am very, very careful about what I say.

JOHN MERROW: Do you have politics?

NANCY WELSH: Sure.

JOHN MERROW: Do you feel strongly?

NANCY WELSH: I definitely do.

JOHN MERROW: You gonna tell me?

NANCY WELSH: I am not. (laughs)

GARY WIELAND: Our policy for being over there is right; these kids hear that from me.

JOHN MERROW: Gary Wieland has a different approach with his third graders.

Wieland has been teaching at McNair for 13 years. Before that he was in the military for 30 years. He was wounded in Vietnam and was awarded a Silver Star and a Bronze Star.

GARY WIELAND: How do you like this so far -- "a desert country in the Middle East." Does this cover what you been saying? Now how about this? Why is your mom and dad there? Why did they go before? Why are they in Afghanistan? What are they bringing? Freedom? Yes.

JOHN MERROW: I was in here maybe 90 minutes and I think there were at least three times when you made reference to the policy. You said, 'Here's a definition of Iraq. It's a desert country in the Middle East where Americans go to bring freedom. Write this down.'

GARY WIELAND: I didn't make that definition up. Students gave me that definition.

JOHN MERROW: But you agree with it?

GARY WIELAND: Sure, I do.

JOHN MERROW: OK, but would it be OK for a teacher saying 'Iraq's a country in the Middle East where America is wasting two billion dollars a week'?

GARY WIELAND: You know, I spent a career in the military on foreign soil so that those people could say that.

TIM HOWLE: I don't ask them their politics I really don't care about their politics. As long as you love the kids and you do the right thing by the kids -- What's more important?

Learning lessons of war

GARY WEILAND: It's not all about the ABCs, you know it's about when a kid leaves here what does he look like compared to when he walked in the door. Can he think independently? Can he solve problems?

My kids blew the doors off of the standardized test that we take last year. I mean I had reading scores; the entire class was in the 95th percentile on the national norm, 93rd point third -- 93.3 percentile for math.

JOHN MERROW: But for Gary Wieland it is not just about his students' academic success.

GARY WEILAND: They know I'm a safe haven for them when something is wrong. They know they can come to the old man and talk to me about it.

JOHN MERROW : Of the 17 children in his class, seven have a parent away from home.

GARY WIELAND: I've become their surrogate dad. They really know that I have a relationship with them and I'm going to stand in the gap.

JOHN MERROW: Tedrick Philyaw's father has been in Iraq for six months. The day before he left he participated in a symbolic exchange where he gave Mr. Wieland full parental rights for \$1.

GARY WIELAND: He came in the classroom and I said Tedrick stand up and I handed him a dollar and I said when you get back you owe me that and I said you know you're now my kid, little boy.

JOHN MERROW: Renee Philyaw is Tedrick's mother.

JOHN MERROW: Where's the dollar?

RENEE PHILYAW: Here in the wallet. He has it in his will that if something happens to him, Tedrick gets that dollar.

GARY WIELAND: I'm touched. I told Tedrick's dad, "If you take care of my country I'll take care of your kid."

JOHN MERROW: Gary Wieland stays in touch with Tedrick's father and several

other parents. He's given out about \$25 and, so far, has gotten all of them back.

JOHN MERROW: If a kid asks the tough question -- Is my dad going to die? Is mom going to get killed? What do you do?

GARY WIELAND: I didn't. Been there, done that, you know, they ... they hurt me, but here I am to annoy you. Your dad is the best-trained soldier in the world. The folks around him are as good as he is. What's to worry about?

NANCY WELSH: We had a child here, not in my class, but another kindergarten class last year whose daddy did not come back, so I do not want to tell them your daddy's going to be fine or your mommy's going to be fine, because I don't know that.

TIM HOWLE: I can't tell you I'm going to be here tomorrow. I can't tell them mom's going to be here tomorrow, but I'm going to tell you no matter what there's someone here to take care of you. These kids are resilient. They come into this building every day doing what they have to, learning and going on with their life. They feel safe. They feel like someone cares.

JOHN MERROW: Tedrick's father is expected home for a two-week break in April. Mrs. Welsh says Austin is still adjusting to his father's absence. Corey Keeling calls home regularly from Afghanistan where he has been on patrol, but not in combat.