

By John A. Scocos

This Memorial Day is a day of national observation and remembrance for those soldiers who never came back – those who have truly sacrificed everything for this country.

It is our most solemn national holiday – and, to me, our most important.

But this Memorial Day, I would like to also honor those who have given nearly as much as our fallen soldiers: The mothers and fathers, the children – the families – of our soldiers who lie in graves, marked and unmarked, around the world.

For them, Memorial Day is more than a ceremony. It is more than flowers to mark and honor the graves of fallen soldiers, which we have been doing as a nation since just after the Civil War.

For those families, Memorial Day marks the day they buried part of themselves. They too have sacrificed profoundly for this country. This Memorial Day, I would like to honor our Gold Star families, those who have lost children, husbands, wives, siblings, fathers and mothers to war.

I would like to profoundly thank people like Judith Singer, the founder of “Being There-Reaching Out,” for creating an organization dedicated to supporting those grieving families. Judith, of Wauwatosa, saw how much these families needed support and personally created an organization to help them deal with the pain and grief of their loss.

Wisconsin families have already lost 87 young men and women in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan – and the war won't likely end soon. That means the contributions of Judith and her organization will continue to play an immediate, strong role in the lives of Wisconsin families for whom the pain of loss is fresh.

Last Memorial Day brought for me yet another level of appreciation for that sacrifice. While I was serving with the U.S. Army in Iraq, the day was just like any other for our military operations there. However, my thoughts kept falling to the many cemeteries I have visited on Memorial Day to address Wisconsin citizens on the importance of Memorial Day.

As a result of my experience, I am even more committed to ensuring that what we do at the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs honors those men and women – and their families – on Memorial Day.

Our Department, our state and our governor are national leaders in ensuring that our veterans are supported when they return home. We have more numerous state programs for veterans and their survivors that truly set Wisconsin apart from other states.

In fact, it was two Memorial Days ago in the Capitol that Gov. Jim Doyle signed into law our state "GI Bill" – enhanced state education benefits for our veterans. In fact, a word about Gov. Doyle: he doesn't call attention to it, but he has attempted to privately attend every funeral of every young Wisconsin man and woman who did not make it back from Iraq and Afghanistan. If he couldn't make it, Lt. Gov. Barbara Lawton attended.

That is leadership and compassion. And that is truly what Memorial Day is all about.

Our veterans deserve our support. Our Gold Star families need our support – and your support. And for those who have fallen, we give our deepest honor and respect on this Memorial Day.