

Michael O'Brien

September 11, 2007 12:13 AM

[Author Archive](#)
[Send to a Friend](#)
[Print Version](#)

A Walk to Remember

A moving memorial.

By Michael O'Brien

Ten-year-old Colton Lockner is preparing for his big day.

The fifth grader, along with tens of thousands of citizens and community members worldwide, is holding a so-called commemorative "Freedom Walk," an event the Department of Defense is hoping will become a yearly tradition to remember September 11, 2001.

The Freedom Walk is in its third year now, and has steadily grown. The Walk is an outgrowth of the Pentagon's "America Supports You" [program](#), a nationwide citizen support network for members of the military. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Allison Barber founded the program in 2004, and manages it today. She was also instrumental in the creation of the Freedom Walk.

Every year, says Barber, the Department of Defense has done something to commemorate 9/11, particularly in remembrance of those killed at the Pentagon that day. "Three years ago, some employees came to ask if we could do something broader to include the community," says Barber. "The first Freedom Walk was three years ago, and people were so inspired by what was created, they wanted to create it in their own communities."

Last year's anniversary of 9/11 saw a handful of Freedom Walks across the country. This year, says Barber, as many as 220 Freedom Walks are being held internationally — all of them coordinated independently of the Department of Defense. Walks are being held not only from coast to coast and border to border, but also around the world, including such places as Iraq, Kuwait, Italy, Japan, Guam, Spain, Korea, and Germany.

The Walks are meant to remember victims of the attacks on the United States six years ago, but also celebrate the sacrifices of the men and women fighting overseas, as well as the military families.

One of the most extraordinary Freedom Walks that is taking place this year is in Sebring, Ohio, where the young Colton Lockner is hosting his *second* annual Freedom Walk.

Lockner decided to organize a Freedom Walk last year in his eastern Ohio hometown, in honor of his uncle who was then serving overseas in Iraq. After seeing a blurb about the "America Supports You" program in an educational magazine at school, Colton set about organizing his own Freedom Walk.

He secured all the performers and personalities himself. "I went up to them and said 'I need to talk to you,'" Lockner says, "And they said, 'Okay.'" He has had assistance from his mom when necessary, who Colton calls his "secretary."

Though this ten-year-old does not remember 9/11 — he only remembers seeing planes crashing into buildings, and asking his mom why they were crashing — he says he thinks 9/11 should be a national holiday. "I think it should be a day to remember, and a day to honor our military men and women," says Lockner.

In Simi Valley, California, Debbie Gregory is preparing for her Freedom Walk, too. Gregory, the president of [MilitaryConnection.com](#), has partnered with the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library to put together this year's 1.8-mile walk.

Gregory's website, dedicated to serving veterans of all wars, has aided in getting 1100 people pre-registered for Tuesday's event, where 9/11 widow Deena Burnett Baily will speak, along with U.S.S. Ronald Reagan Commanding Officer Terry Kraft and Iraq veteran and Purple Heart recipient, Corporal Megan Leavey.

Last year's walk was incredibly gratifying, according to Gregory. "Our friends from the military community were treated like rock stars," she says.

She hopes this year will be even larger, and will become a yearly tradition. "I don't think we can ever forget 9/11, nor should we," Gregory says. "People have different points of view. But for that day, we aren't Republicans, Democrats, conservatives, or liberals — we're all Americans for that day."

Also planning a freedom walk is teacher Ashley Singleton from Zachary, Louisiana. Her husband just returned from Iraq recently, and now, the principal of the school in which she teaches has been called up to serve in Iraq, after tours in Afghanistan and New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina.

Singleton has organized a Freedom Walk at her school. Some 650 second and third graders will walk Tuesday to support their principal, as well as the many family members the children have serving in the military.

"Being part of a military family was something I never wanted to do, but it's an indescribable feeling," says Singleton, who was nine months pregnant when her husband was called up for a two-year deployment in Iraq. "It's hard to understand what you're going through, without others," she says of the military community that came to her support.

Looking towards her Freedom Walk, Singleton talks about how much this event means to her students, as well as herself. "I show the students pictures of my husband," she says, "And they smile and say, 'My daddy wears a uniform like that!'"

For her part, this is what Allison Barber envisioned. "I hope on the 10th anniversary of 9/11 there will be walks in communities across the country," Barber says.

"A new national tradition has begun. It's unique and powerful," Barber says. "Americans are coming together, and it's not about politics, it's not about the war — it's about remembering and reflecting."

— *Michael O'Brien was the Collegiate Network summer intern for National Review this summer.*
