

Families speak publicly about war losses

By Bob Kalinowski
Staff Writer

JENKINS TWP. — It was a conversation about the war, but not the politics behind the conflict.

The discussion was about people, about soldiers — the human cost of war.

Three area families who lost a loved one in the Iraq war gathered the courage Thursday night to go on live television to speak about their loss.

To most people, the families said, Sgt. Sherwood Baker of Plymouth, 1st Lt. Michael Cleary of Dallas Township and Sgt. Sean Thomas, of Hughesville, Lycoming County, are statistics and widely unknown outside their home communities.

The parents of the men said they agreed to come together Thursday for the hour-long program at the WVIA-TV studio to tell residents of Northeastern and Central Pennsylvania something about the young men who paid the ultimate price.

During most of the program, they summarized highlights of their children's lives from elementary school to the days they went off to a war zone far away. But the moments when they expressed how they learned their loved one was killed were among the most heart wrenching.

"I collapsed against the door," Zapalla recalled.



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From left, Suzanne Kelly, WVIA host, speaks with Celeste Zappala, mother of Sherwood Baker; Jack and Marianne Cleary, parents of Michael Cleary; Daniel and Diane Thomas, parents of Sean Michael Thomas.

"I just screamed and hid under a blanket and stayed there," Marianne Cleary said.

"I screamed and told them (military casualty officers) to leave," said Diana Thomas.

Baker was killed in April 2004. Cleary was killed in December 2005. Thomas died in March of this year.

The families say the grief hasn't subsided over time, but they've learned to keep the thier sons' legacies alive.

Thursday's program helped do so, they said.

Baker's mother, Celeste Zapalla, spoke about her son's love of his nephews, his devotion to his comrades in the 109th Field Artillery, his work as a disc jockey and his dedication to his job as a social worker.

Cleary's parents, Marianne

WHEN TO WATCH

A re-broadcast of the program is scheduled for Saturday at 12:30 a.m. on WVIA-TV.

and Jack, noted his athletic prowess at Dallas High School, his memorable grin and his sarcastic form of humor.

About 40 people were in the audience for the program.

Baker would turn 34 years old today.

"We'll visit the cemetery and take a cake of course," Zapalla said. "I know he's gone, but I always feel him with me. I always talk to him. In my heart, I know he's not far away from me."

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