

Mother's Day Special: Dinner with the Smileys

By [Sarah Smiley@SarahSmiley](mailto:SarahSmiley@SarahSmiley.com) Parade Magazine, May 12, 2013 pp. 7-11 sarahsmiley.com



Sarah Smiley with her three boys (from left), Owen, Ford, and Lindell, at their home in Maine.(Peter Frank Edwards)

When Sarah Smiley's husband deployed overseas for a yearlong tour, an entire community stepped in to fill his empty seat at the table, keeping Sarah and her three young boys company over weekly servings of salad and lasagna.

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Editor's note: *Due to a printing error, a small number of PARADE issues did not contain the complete cover story. The full text is below.*

Even after 14 years as a navy wife, I still forget which part of Dustin's leaving will be hardest. At first I think it'll be our last hug at the airport, or when he kneels down to say goodbye to our boys, one at a time. Then I imagine it will be returning to our house, where I'll find Dustin's still-wet toothbrush on the bathroom sink and his running shoes strewn across the mudroom floor—reminders that he was just here, and now he's not. H But the hardest part is actually sitting down to dinner without him. Breakfast and lunch aren't so bad; the boys and I eat in shifts, with TV noise in the background, before we rush off to school and work. At dinnertime, though, when we gather around our wooden farm table, there are

pauses he used to fill (“What did you learn at school today?”—his favorite question) and too much food in the pan. Dustin’s empty chair makes his absence that much more present.

Before my husband left for his latest deployment—a 13-month tour in Djibouti, Africa, starting in November 2011—our middle son, Owen, who was 8 at the time, said to his dad, “It will be weird not to have you at the table.”

I froze, surprised that Owen had put words to my exact feelings. “Then let’s fill Dad’s seat,” I said reflexively, not sure yet what I meant. “We’ll invite people over for dinner. Shoot, we can invite someone every week if you want.”

Dustin and the boys shot each other sideways glances. They know me too well: I’m not a cook. I hate small talk. Our “china” is a mismatched set of chipped plates, and our downstairs bathroom is never clean. Whenever I host a party, there’s a moment right before the guests arrive when I wish I could disappear into the basement.

But I couldn’t bear the idea of facing Dustin’s empty chair for an entire year. “Like, we can even invite our teachers?” Owen asked.

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“I get to invite Mr. Bennett first!” said 10-year-old Ford, his hand in the air. “Can we invite the president?” Lindell, our soon-to-be preschooler, shouted as he danced excitedly in his chair. “Or the mayor?”

Everyone laughed. “Why not?” I said.

Soon after Dustin deployed, we began brainstorming a wish list of invitees from our community in Bangor, Maine. The boys decided to take turns inviting a new guest each week. Ford was up first. Because he was learning about government in school, he chose one of Maine’s U.S. senators, Susan Collins, who has a home on the east side of town. In his letter, addressed to her office in Washington, D.C., he wrote: “We are wondering if you would like to come to dinner some time this year (which is stretching it quite a bit but my mom insisted that we be flexible).”



Lindell sneaks up on then Bangor police chief (and dinner guest) Ron Gastia. (Andrea Hand)

I never expected that she'd be able to accept, and I encouraged the boys to invite more "realistic" guests in the meantime. But in late December, I got a call from the Capitol: The senator was coming the first week in January.

I probably should have begun drilling table manners into my kids immediately. My mother begged me to. I wasn't even sure the boys knew to put their napkins—or in our house, folded paper towels—in their laps. But during those first few weeks after Dustin left, when I was struggling to get my bearings as a "single" mom, etiquette lessons were a low priority.

As the senator's headlights swept across our snowy yard the night of our first dinner, I suddenly regretted my casualness. I was still baking lasagna and had no time to shower and change. I'd be greeting her in an old beige cardigan and black pants with a fallen hem. Before the senator could ring the bell, I grabbed the boys, licked my fingers, and slicked back their untrimmed hair. "No potty humor," I hissed. "Or whoopee cushions." That was the last moment I felt nervous. Senator Collins walked into our living room with all the warm familiarity of a favorite aunt. She sat on the couch and pulled Lindell into her lap; he patted her face and rubbed her cheeks as we got acquainted. The senator didn't seem to mind my paper towel napkins or my fresh-from-the-bag salad. By the time the lasagna was gone, I had nearly forgotten she was a powerful political figure.

For dessert, I put out the tin of homemade brownies the senator had brought. "Eat around the nuts," I said to the boys under my breath, trying to head off complaints.

Senator Collins was in the middle of a conversation with Dustin over Skype on my laptop at the end of the table. I came around to wave at Dustin, as Lindell climbed in and out of the senator's lap, screaming "Hi, Daddy!" After we said goodbye and she closed the screen, I gasped at what was on the other side: neat little piles of nuts and brownie crumbs. Senator Collins just laughed. Then she offered to do the dishes.



The boys greet a replica of R2-D2 before dinner No. 19. (Andrea Hand)

I worried that a U.S. senator would be a tough act to follow. But in the coming months, the boys seemed to welcome each of our guests with the same basic expectations: *Show me that I matter. Help me not miss my dad.* We ate with the Bangor police chief, our local weatherman, a symphony conductor, an Olympic gold medal rower, and a pair of radio DJs. Dr. Scott Peterson, a baseball historian, took the boys to see a University of Maine game. Former governor **John Baldacci** played catch with them. Children's illustrator **Scott Nash** organized a **Jackson Pollock**-like painting session in the backyard. A local *Star Wars* enthusiast brought his life-size R2-D2 robot to dinner. And a zookeeper entertained us with stories about his gorilla friend "Little Joe," who had escaped not once, but twice.

Instead of wishing away the days of Dustin's deployment, we were filling them with interesting people and role models. We missed him, of course. But we seldom felt lonely.

In the spring, however, our dinners began to take on a more serious tone. The 17th week, we were invited to dine at a local nursing home with a man and his wife, who has Alzheimer's disease. I didn't grasp the extent of Anita's illness until that night, when she began smearing pasta sauce on the table. At one point, she held up a sauce-coated hand to Owen and asked, "Would you like a bite?" He replied quietly, "I'm okay, but thank you."

Frank told me that Anita didn't remember anything from their marriage. "The only thing she knows is that I'm her best friend," he said. As I watched him clutch Anita's shaking hand, I realized there are many ways to be lonely. I couldn't hold Dustin's hand, but we could still reminisce long distance about saying "I do," having our first baby, buying our first house.

In May, Congressman **Mike Michaud** took us to Mount Hope Cemetery to put flags on veterans' graves. I still hadn't given the boys a lesson in formality. But by that point, they somehow just knew. Ford dutifully walked up and down the rows of headstones while Owen re-counted his flags and worried whether he had forgotten someone. Lindell rode on the congressman's shoulders as he read aloud the names on the graves.

On Memorial Day, principal Lynn Silk told us about losing her son, Brandon, an army staff sergeant, in a helicopter crash. The boys listened quietly as Lynn talked about Brandon's love of sports and practical jokes. When she left at the end of the night, Ford shook her hand and thanked her for coming.

By the time summer came, the weekly dinners had naturally evolved into something different altogether. We had met people with problems far greater than ours over the previous few months. Dustin was gone but still very much a part of our lives, and now we had a community helping us through his deployment. Many of our remaining dinners became about recognizing our own strength.

On a beautiful August afternoon, we hiked seven rocky miles to and from a picnic at Mount Katahdin's Chimney Pond with two teachers. That same month, we scaled a cliff at Acadia National Park and marveled at our feat over dinner with world-renowned climbing guide Jon Tierney. But perhaps most important, we found ways to reach out to others who were lonely and hurting. In October, the boys offered to take our newly widowed neighbor to lunch at a bakeshop downtown ("You don't have to be alone," Ford told her), and a few weeks later, Owen missed a friend's birthday party to attend the funeral of another neighbor. "It's the right thing to do," he said.



The

Smileys reunite at Bangor International Airport last December. (Andrea Hand)

The day Dustin was due back from Africa, more than 60 of our guests from the 52 dinners came with us to the airport to welcome him home. We were surrounded by our new friends as I hugged Dustin's neck and the boys clasped their arms around his waist and legs. After we finally let go, Lindell took Dustin's hand and introduced his father to the people who had filled his seat while he was gone: "This is my teacher! This is Paul! This is my dad!"

The old farm table was already set when we brought Dustin home that evening: five plates, and five folded paper towels. Lindell led Dustin to his usual place. "This is where our guests sat," he said. "But tonight it's for you." Dustin pulled out the chair. There was a Post-it note on the seat. It read "Reserved for Dad."

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