

A Kid at Heart

Social worker helps military families cope.

By Heather Vander Plaats

Challenging a three-year-old to a game of *Candy Land* is all in a day's work for Doug Lehman '84.

As a Licensed Clinical Social Worker at Fort Carson, a U.S. Army base near Colorado Springs, Colo., Lehman helps to equip military families, particularly children, with tools to cope with having a loved one off at war. About 15,000 active-duty soldiers and their family members, including 12,500 children, call Fort Carson home. At any one time, more than one-third of the kids have parents deployed to war zones in places such as Iraq and Afghanistan.

"Army kids are resilient," Lehman said. "They can get used to a parent being deployed and they can learn coping skills, but they're not going to avoid being affected by what's going on."

Lehman sees children and their parents every day in his office at Evans Army Community Hospital, where he has worked as both a civilian and contract employee for five years. His shelves are stacked with books, games, toys, and crayons – things he uses to encourage kids to talk about how it feels to miss their parents and what they're most worried about. He's counseled kids who've exhibited all kinds of responses to a parent's deployment – from behavioral problems at school, to social withdrawal, to feelings of abandonment.

"The biggest issue for kids is safety," Lehman said. "I repeatedly hear kids tell me that they don't believe their parents are safe and that they know their mom or dad will die. Often those fears play out at school and sometimes the teachers don't understand. When they get in trouble at school, the parents start to blame themselves."



Doug Lehman '84 enrolled at Hope in 1980 planning on a social work career. His innovative work with children and families at Evans Army Community Hospital in Colorado has won significant professional recognition.

Lehman spends a lot of time sitting on his office floor, at eye level with the kids that come to see him. As he plays a game of *Candy Land* with them or watches as they draw a picture of their family, he'll ask what they enjoy doing with their mom or dad and what they miss most. Some kids would rather not talk, so he'll guide them to a "feeling faces"

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poster on his wall and ask them to point to a face that looks like how they're feeling that day. With diagnostic tools like these, he's able to pinpoint anxieties and find ways to address them.

Lehman has found that he's had to become savvier therapeutically in the last couple of years, as many children are experiencing a second or even third deployment of a parent.

"There are people working on research into this, but there's not a lot out there as far as how redeployments are affecting these kids, short-term and long-term," he said.

Nonetheless, he and other professionals at Fort Carson have created an array of programs to benefit families on the base. In an effort to better communicate the existence of these programs, Lehman oversaw the development of the Family Intervention Team in 2004, combining multiple agencies to form a team that serves as a one-stop resource to direct families to the appropriate programs for their needs. Parents who need a break can bring their

kids to Caring Saturdays, where free childcare is offered. At Operation Story Time, departing soldiers have a chance to record a CD of themselves reading bedtime stories so that their children can hear their voices while they're gone. There are also peer-to-peer groups in which children and teens can share their experiences with people their own age. Similar groups are in place for spouses of deployed soldiers.

Lehman's work with the military children and families at Fort Carson has not gone unnoticed. Last year, the National Association of Social Workers, Colorado Chapter, presented him with the Trailblazer award for his innovative, groundbreaking work.

"He's probably at the forefront of social work practice regarding the impact of war and deployment on families and children," said Dr. James Piers '69, professor of sociology and social work and director of the social work program at Hope. "I appreciate his skillful and innovative use of social work theory and practice methods in this new situation and that the results seem so promising."

Several years ago, Lehman spoke in one of Dr. Piers's classes at Hope, and the Hope professor recalled Lehman's passion for his work.

"He's sold on the fact that social work practice can bring change," Dr. Piers said.

Lehman came to Hope in 1980 with an idea that a career in social work was the right path to take. Psychology was his favorite class in high school, and he'd grown up in a family that valued the social work field. His father was an ordained minister with a doctorate in family and marriage therapy, and he worked for Young Life, a non-denominational Christian youth ministry. When Lehman was 16, his family moved from West Michigan to Australia where his father established a new branch of the organization.

Two years later, Lehman decided to return to the United States to attend Hope, earning degrees in psychology and business. One of his most meaningful experiences came at the end of his junior year, when he took a May Term "Helping Relationships" course – a rigorous off-campus summer seminar that taught counseling therapy and techniques.

"My years at Hope not only gave me an academic knowledge base, but also the character confidence to participate in the work world," he said. "At a liberal arts school, you're not too narrowly focused academically and in

your personal life, and I think that contributed to my readiness in moving on to the next phase in life."

In the years since, Lehman has held a variety of social work jobs and served on the boards of numerous organizations, including the Colorado Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers. In 1993, he received his Master of Social Work degree from the University of Denver. In addition to his licensure as a social worker, he is also a Licensed Clinical Drug and Alcohol Counselor. Currently, he is teaching a master's level course for nearby Newman University and writing a chapter for a military psychiatry textbook slated for publication this summer.

Lehman's enthusiasm for his work with children is obvious. Even he admits that he's "just a kid at heart" who loves hunkering down on his office floor to play a game of *Chutes and Ladders*.

"I have a great job," he said. "I just have fun everyday. I get to practice prevention and intervention with kids and their families, and I feel good about that."

(Editor's Note: Doug will talk about his work during a Hope regional event scheduled for Friday, April 20, at the U.S. Air Force Academy. Please visit the Alumni Office online at or call (616) 395-7250 to learn more.)



As a "kid at heart," social worker Doug Lehman '84 enjoys working with children. His fun approach to counseling aids a serious purpose: helping the children of Army personnel cope with their parents' deployment. (Photos by Joel Sundquist)

