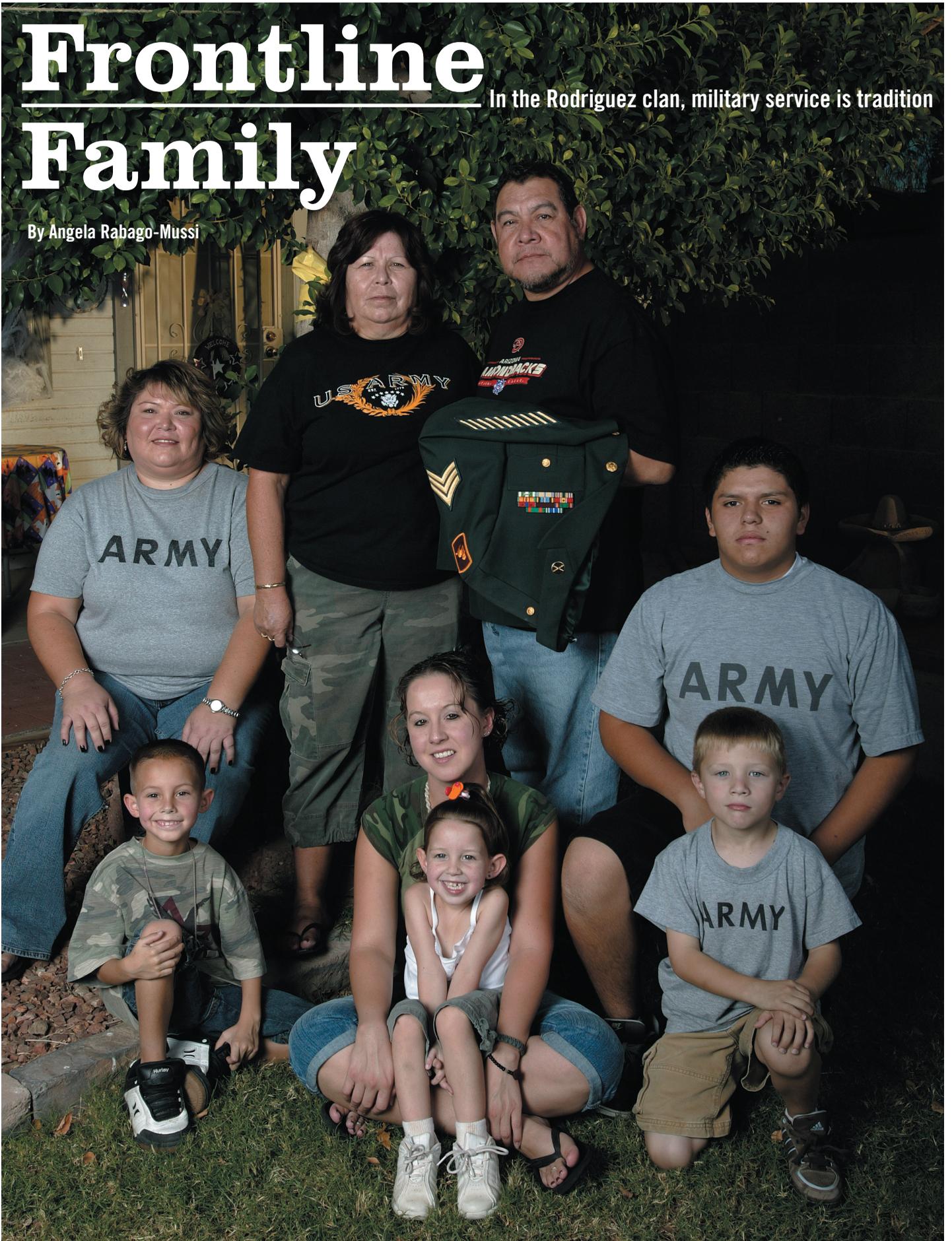


# Frontline Family

In the Rodriguez clan, military service is tradition

By Angela Rabago-Mussi



Juan Rodriguez hadn't attended a military funeral since the Vietnam War. This year, he's been to three. The latest was in September, when he and his wife, Maggie Rodriguez, paid their respects at the funeral of Mykel F. Miller, who on September 6 became the first Arizona National Guard soldier of Hispanic background to die in Afghanistan.

This funeral hit particularly close to home for the Rodriguez family, since Miller served in the same Guard unit as their son, Rick Rodriguez. Six hundred members of the 1-158<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion were deployed to Afghanistan in March. "Miller was the second

(The total includes deployments of any length and voluntary double deployments).

With Hispanics making up 24.4 percent of the Air National Guard and 17.5 percent of the Army National Guard, war has been brought close to home for many Latino families in Arizona.

And, in the full-time branches of the military, the number of Hispanic enlistments increased 18 percent from 2001 to 2005 as recruitment efforts increasingly focus on the fast-growing community that is slightly underrepresented in the military. (About 9.49 percent of the active duty enlisted force is

This is certainly true for Latinos like Erika Gonzalez, who was back home in Phoenix from Tennessee when she learned of Miller's death and stayed to attend his funeral. She trained with Miller and remembers him as someone she admired. Gonzalez, a petite 19-year-old who would give no signs of being a soldier but for her dress uniform, joined the Army National Guard in 2005. It was September 9, she remembers clearly, at the beginning of her senior year. She was only 17, so her mother had to sign for her, on the condition that Erika chose a job that wouldn't put her on the "front lines."

"My dad didn't want me to join, he was

## Nowadays, if you enlist, you know you're going to get deployed." — Maggie Rodriguez

one from their unit to die. The first was in June," Juan Rodriguez said, referring to Charles R. Browning who died June 1.

With Guard deployments set at one year for now, Rick Rodriguez is scheduled to return home in March, but even then there will be little relief for the family: the Rodriguez' youngest daughter, Sonya, will be deployed to Iraq with her Guard unit in January.

With a long history of military service, the Peoria family knows well the tension and constant worry that fills each day that a loved one is in a war zone. Maggie's father served during World War II and Juan and Maggie were newly married high school sweethearts when Juan served two years in Vietnam with the Navy. Later, his service with the Navy Reserve and then the Army National Guard would mean a tour in Kuwait before he finally retired from the Guard in 2004. But Maggie says "you never get used to it," even after being married to a military man for 37 years.

"It's awful," Maggie says, her voice crackling, "I worry all the time." It's a painful reality that military families – whether they are full-time military or part-timers in the Reserves or National Guard – increasingly face. As Juan says, "Nowadays the Reserves and Guard play a different role. Nowadays, if you enlist, you know you're going to get deployed."

Maggie says her kids knew that going in. "We all knew that. You just make the best of it. You have to have faith in God."

Of the 7,800 Arizona Air and Army National Guard members, 1,270 are currently deployed in Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom (Afghanistan). Since 9/11, there have been a total of 5,400 Arizona Guard deployments to the Middle East.

Hispanic; while Hispanics ages 18 to 44 make up about 13.35 percent of the civilian labor force, according to a 2003 report by the Pew Hispanic Center).

As was the case with siblings Rick and Sonya Rodriguez, who both joined the Guard in 2005, enlistees are still attracted to the opportunities the military offers despite the risks of serving during wartime.

### A call to serve

Particularly for Hispanics, "a lot of it is tradition, that is a common theme," says Gen. Hugo Salazar, who became the highest ranking Latino in the Arizona National Guard when he was promoted from colonel to general last month. He adds that in his estimation, "about half of (Guard enlistees) have a father, brother, uncle or grandfather who has served."

Salazar, who is the director of the state's Army National Guard, says the military also offers education and employment opportunities and a sense of belonging. His own story touches on that. As a first-generation Mexican-American with the "classic immigrant story" he wasn't following family tradition but, instead, joined the Army after attending college and starting a business career. That was 24 years ago and, now that his two oldest sons are serving in the Air Force, he says, "I guess I'm starting the legacy."

Of course, a strong feeling of patriotic duty motivates many to join the military.

really worried," Gonzalez says. But she decided she was "going military" when she was in eighth grade and the U.S. was attacked on 9/11. She was even more inspired when Pat Tillman left his pro-football career for the military. "I knew I wanted to go and help, too," Gonzalez says, adding that she eventually plans to join the regular full-time military. Her Guard unit is scheduled to deploy in 2009.

Her mother, Julie Gonzalez, says the prospect of her daughter serving during a war "scares the hell out of me" and the loss of Erika's friend and fellow Guardsman only increases her fears. But it all comes down to what every parent knows: "It's her choice."

For spouses like Rhonda Rodriguez, it was no surprise when her husband Rick, at age 31, came home one day and announced he had joined the Guard. "I knew that it was something he always wanted to do," she says, smiling as Rick's family recounts how he was a huge GI Joe fan as a kid. Rhonda says he'll probably enlist full-time after he returns from Afghanistan.

Navy pilot David Elias says his fascination with the military also began when he was just a boy. He and his father would drive out to Luke Air Force Base on the weekends and watch the planes fly in. "I've always wanted to fly," says Elias, who just returned from his second six-month tour in Afghanistan and is now stationed in Washington. The military was the best way to follow his dreams of becoming a pilot.

Serving during a war is "bittersweet," he says, "You don't want to have to do it but it's good to take all the training you've had and put it to use." But he acknowledges that being deployed is hardest on his wife, Chanin, and his family. "They definitely worry and they're always praying."

**MAILING TO MILITARY PERSONNEL**  
For regulations and details on how to send packages to those serving overseas, visit [www.latinopm.com](http://www.latinopm.com)

# The Fallen

Since 9/11, eight Arizona Latinos have died in Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom as of Sept. 1. They are:

**Mykel F. Miller, 19,** of Phoenix, Army National Guard, died in Afghanistan on Sept. 6, 2007.



**Raymond S. Armijo, 22,** of Phoenix, Army, died in Iraq on Oct. 10, 2006.

**Joseph J. Duenas, 23,** of Mesa, Army, died in Iraq on March 30, 2006.

**Ismael G. Solorio, 21,** of San Luis, Army, died in Iraq on April 9, 2007.



**Frank B. Hernandez, 21,** of Phoenix, Army, died in Iraq on Feb. 17, 2005.

**Joshua E. Lucero, 19,** of Tucson, Marines, died in Iraq on Nov. 27, 2004.

**Fernando Padilla-Ramirez, 26,** of San Luis, Marines, died in Iraq on March 28, 2003.

**Frank M. Sandoval, 27,** of Yuma, Army, died on June 18, 2007 of injuries sustained in Iraq on Nov. 28, 2005.



## The home front burden

General Salazar says seeing firsthand the challenges that families experience after so many Guard members have been deployed gives him a new perspective on how his own family was affected by his eight-month deployment to Iraq in 2004. "When you go over there, you're busy working 16-hour days," he explains. "It's so much harder on the family than it is on the person who is deployed."

Spouses often have to take on new duties, from paying the bills to fixing the car; and deployments away from regular jobs can cause financial hardship.

And then there's the emotional toll.

On a recent afternoon, Rhonda Rodriguez takes her two young children to visit her in-laws. She's worried because her husband Rick, who usually calls every morning, didn't call today. The yellow ribbons tied around the trees in Juan and Maggie Rodriguez' yard and the American flags that are everywhere from the tablecloth to the welcome mat are a sign that the whole family is anxiously waiting until Rick's two-week leave for Christmas.

News reports from cities like Kabul and Jalalabad pass right over most people, but Juan and Maggie have practically become experts on the geography of Afghanistan. They follow the news incessantly, checking online reports and watching the nightly news to collect any bit of information that may affect their son.

Maggie can't help but break down when she talks about the anxiety she feels. Rick, a gunner, has e-mailed photos showing him sitting atop a Humvee. Maggie worries that there's nothing to shield him.

Juan keeps reminding himself that the casualties in this conflict are thousands less than in Vietnam. "Their chances of coming back alive are really good. I think about things like that just to ease it a little," he says. But he shares how they sent their son a care package including canned *menudo*. Instead of saving it for a Sept. 16 celebration, Rick and his buddies decided to go ahead and open it before a big mission, just in case.

While the war has become so much a part of their lives, Rick's sister, Alicia Rodriguez, says it annoys her that so many people seem not to care. At an Arizona Diamondbacks game, her boys remove their hats and cross their hearts as she's taught them when the national anthem plays. Sometimes, others see them and stop, too. Most don't.

The family plans a big Christmas celebration when Rick comes home on leave. Then it will be time for Sonya to deploy and Rick to return for three more months. Alicia shares this message from her only brother: "My brother says that what people need to do is support our troops' families. He worries about his family a lot." ■

## Supporting Our Troops

Even if you don't personally know anyone serving overseas in Iraq or Afghanistan, there are many ways to support the troops. Here are a few local efforts:

The **Arizona National Guard Emergency Relief Fund** is a private nonprofit organization which helps service members and their dependents. The fund provides emergency financial assistance in the form of loans or grants to soldiers and their dependents in need. Some of the things the fund helps with include rent and mortgage payments, food and utilities, funeral and medical expenses. To make a tax deductible contribution you can find an online donation form at [www.aerfund.org/forms/aerf\\_donate.htm](http://www.aerfund.org/forms/aerf_donate.htm) or call (602) 267-2731.

**Packages From Home** is a Glendale-based nonprofit which sends care packages to troops serving overseas. The group accepts

donations of goods for gift packages, and financial donations to pay for postage to send the packages. It also needs volunteers to wrap and mail the packages. For more information see the group's Web site at [www.packagesfromhome.org](http://www.packagesfromhome.org), where you can also find a list of donation drop-off centers throughout the Valley.

Over 4,000 veterans of **Operation Iraqi Freedom** and **Operation Enduring Freedom** have been welcomed to Carl T. Hayden VA Medical Center, where they can receive two years of free medical care, says **Brenda Gust**, an outreach social worker for returning soldiers. The Center's Voluntary Services Department accepts donations of both funds and goods and needs volunteers to help in many areas. For more information see the Web site at [www.southwest.va.gov/phoenix](http://www.southwest.va.gov/phoenix) or call (602) 277-5551 Ext. 7499.