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# Family

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osing a loved one is never easy, but there is something particularly painful about fetal and infant loss. One Air Force family has turned their own devastating experience into a lasting memorial to their lost infant son Braden, forming a non-profit organization dedicated to providing live butterflies to families of perinatal loss. The butterflies can be released by the family as a sign of hope and remembrance for the lost little one.

According to Taylor South, who co-founded Braden's Butterflies with her husband Danny, a USAF loadmaster, the release of a butterfly is meant to symbolize the connec-

tion of two lives, and it allows families who have lost an infant to find peace and reconnect with their lost child.

"The idea for Braden's Butterflies began in 2016 after we lost our son Braden to malignant infantile fibrosarcoma at 37 weeks gestation," Taylor explains. "Our loss was devastating, but we never felt alone for a single second. Our community in Altus, S.C., both Air Force and local, as well as our families, rallied around us in ways I can't even explain. Slowly, stories began to come from people close to us and people we barely knew about their

similar experiences with losing an infant late in pregnancy or early in life."

Danny South has been in the Air Force for 18 years and currently serves as senior enlisted leader for the 43rd Operations Sup-



**Taylor South with husband Danny, son Cullen, and daughter Camille**



port Squadron, stationed at Pope Army Airfield; Taylor South currently serves as chair of the English department at Philip Simmons High School in Charleston, and the couple have two surviving children, Cullen, 9, and Camille 4. She credits the caring hospital staff and her mother with guiding the family through their period of loss and helping establish Braden's Butterflies to assist others facing similar devastating circumstances.

"The team at OU (Oklahoma) Children's Hospital guided us through the entire process of discovering what had happened and ensured the health of ourselves, our living son Cullen, and hopefully any future children," she recalls. "We are so thankful for the compassion they showed us in what was undoubtedly our darkest hour."

After Braden passed away, the family was notified that they qualified for a Servicemembers' Group Life Insurance (SGLI) benefit. "We didn't feel right taking it; but in Braden's honor, we decided to establish a non-profit to help families experiencing perinatal loss. My mom was in town to help take care of us after Braden's death, and she came across a variant of butterfly bush. Sitting around the kitchen table, the thought of releasing butterflies seemed so peaceful and healing, and we decided to make this a possibility for other families facing such a tough reality after the death of an infant."


The non-profit organization relies on donations and fundraisers to provide the live butterflies to families who have lost a child. The live butterflies are shipped overnight in cold packs, between March 1 and October 15, to accommodate the butterfly lifecycle. Since its founding, Braden's Butterflies has distributed 218 certificates to families; each \$100 certificate covers the cost of shipping about 12 butterflies. The program is open to any family who has experience fetal or infant loss, both military and non-military. "Experiencing a loss like this is devastating for anyone," Taylor South points out. "Going through this when you are away from your families and possibly in a new place where the people and community are unfamiliar adds a layer or fear that just is not needed. To help our military families feel connected, even from

thousands of miles away, is something that can make such a difference."

Families generally find out about the program through word-of-mouth or social media. "We have been amazed that families reach out to us," she remarks. "People we know from previous assignments spread the word to their new families. Social media has been a great way to engage with new families and families we have met along the way." Danny South also is a master resiliency trainer for the Air Force, speaking at a number of events and recording a video about the family's experience (<https://www.dvidshub.net/video/756255/senior-master-sgt-danny-south-talks-about-resilience-leadership-and-connection>).

Going forward, Taylor South says the organization hopes to build partnerships with children's hospitals to allow them to reach

more families, but she acknowledges that this can be difficult due to the vagaries of military life and deployments. "The evolution of virtual collaboration during COVID will hopefully help us find new ways of creating and maintaining relationships with hospitals and communities, even when we can't physically be there," she notes.

"Our goal is to reciprocate the kindness that sustained us to others walking the path we know too well," she adds. "I don't know that I would be here today had people not found the strength to hold our family together and help us find a way forward. The process not only of releasing butterflies, but also of creating Braden's Butterflies was an enormous part of the healing process. Not only did I realize that I was not alone in my grief, I was able to help others know they were not alone either." 

## About Braden's Butterflies

*I am the butterfly – a symbol of hope.*

*To help you grieve, to help you cope.*

*Whisper to me your prayers, your wishes,*

*Your hopes, your dreams, your hugs, your kisses.*

*Whisper to me a lullaby,*

*Then with those words let me fly.*

*I am your butterfly – your symbol of hope.*

For more information, visit the Braden's Butterflies website at: <https://www.bradensbutterflies.com/>. Donations can be made via PayPal or by mailing a check to: Braden's Butterflies, 228 Waning Way, Charleston, SC 29492.

