

Good afternoon,

Thank you for having me here today and for your willingness to hear my testimony and story. My name is Tiffany Eckert. I am a longtime resident of Ohio. I moved here when I was ten years old and have lived in Waterville for the past 18 years.

I was 20 years old when I met Andy Eckert, a military kid who made his home and life in Whitehouse, Ohio. We met on September 19, 2002, a day I will never forget. I knew within seconds of looking into Andy's bright blue eyes that my life would change forever. He told me the next day that he knew he would be called away with the Army in the coming months and that I would be his wife before he left, explaining that he knew the moment we met that I was the one.

He was activated to Iraq on February 19, 2003. Just a few days later, a stranger in a hallway married us on February 28th at the Lucas County Courthouse in Toledo, Ohio. He left six days later. During that time, our daughter, Marlee Freedom, was born. He came home as a Purple Heart veteran when she was 11 months old and met her for the first time.

Although Andy had been deemed non deployable for injuries sustained during his first tour, he signed a waiver and volunteered to return when his unit, the 983rd out of Monclova, Ohio, deployed in the fall of 2004. They left for Northern Iraq on Christmas day.

Andy came home on leave in March 2005 to see our son, Myles, born. He was home for 14 days, loving on me and our children. I will never forget those days together, or the last time I saw him alive. We were saying goodbye, standing at the TSA checkpoint at the Toledo Express Airport. He told me he loved me more than anything and that I would never see him again. He said he knew that he would not be coming home from Iraq.

Less than a month later, Andy's premonition would come true on Mother's Day, May 8, 2005. Two years, two months, and eleven days after we spoke our vows, he was gone. The incident occurred in Samarra, just yards from where the previous incident had almost killed him during his first deployment. He died in a field hospital in Balad. A terrorist murdered him. Andy was twenty-four, I was twenty-three, Marlee Freedom was twenty-two months old, and Myles was one month old.

Andy called home just hours before he was killed. As fate would have it, he gave me many final directives during that call. He shared with me that he wanted to be buried in the Anthony Wayne community if he did not come home. Instead of being buried in Arlington, he wanted to be by a tree in the small town where he graduated high school. The two of us, side-by-side in the place we dreamed of raising our children. I have fulfilled his wish. He is buried in the Whitehouse Cemetery in Whitehouse, Ohio, next to a tree that we lovingly call "daddy tree," five minutes down the road from where I have raised our children in Waterville.

It has been an honor for me and my family to call Ohio home. The people of this great state have taken care of us and wrapped their arms around us during the unimaginable. It would help me and my children so incredibly much to be able to qualify for a property tax exemption on our home. I currently pay \$5,046.04 a year, and given my role as sole provider to our children, this benefit would allow me more freedom to be a better mother, and be more involved in their lives.

Many states across the country offer property and tax exemptions to widows/ widowers of those killed in action or those who died in the line of duty.

Oftentimes, states give property tax exemptions to widows/widowers of 100% service-disabled veterans, but they seem to forget that our loved ones are gone forever. It often is an oversight, but it is an oversight that affects many families of those killed directly in war.

I want to thank you all for considering this for my family and for other widows/widowers here and as a tribute to Ohioans like Andy, who have given their lives for this country and their last full measure of devotion to all of us.

My family, the entire Gold Star community, and I are grateful. Above all else, I know that there is one incredibly handsome soldier with a crooked grin and piercing blue eyes with us here today who is thankful for your consideration. He has been with me all the while, with every step, all these years. I know that today is no different.

Thank you.