



The dream was to send one person home, now the dream is to send as many people home as possible. In November of 2011, Ms. Esther Steinle made it her personal mission to send an Airman home. Since then, with her guidance and continuation of the program, Angel Arms has sent home over 300 Airmen to visit their families all over the United States and other countries. This program has grown from the support of the local community and leadership at Cannon Air Force Base. One group on base has made it their mission to see the Airmen of Cannon make it home for the holidays. Here is an interview with two members of the First Sergeants Association and how they help the Angel Arms program continue to succeed.

**Q: What is the job of the First Sergeants?**

A: MSgt DeWitt: Formally we take care of the Morale, Welfare and Health of the individuals in the squadron. Whoever's in our unit, we try and make sure we take care of them. I always use an example that we're the 'Human Resources' of the squadron. MSgt Melendez: There's a wealth of responsibilities that we have; we're advisors to our Commanders, we're advisors to our Chiefs as well, but like he [DeWitt] said, our job is to take care of the people. Take care of the Airmen. Helping with whatever they need personally and professionally.

**Q: How do you personalize this job to make your Airmen feel heard?**

A: MSgt DeWitt: To me, leadership needs a human piece to it. A "mission first, people always" type of thing. If you're not taking care of the people, the missions not going to get done. I enjoy the opportunity to be able to not necessarily have to focus primarily on the turning wrenches portion of the mission, but the people portion of the mission. That's something that I enjoy as Chris, as myself.

MSgt Melendez: For me, I like the approach of, "treat everyone how you want to be treated." I always think about it; if I had issues and I was coming to someone in a leadership position, I would hope that they would be invested in me and they're actively listening to me. I want to give that in return to them [the Airmen] from this position [First Sergeant]. Because I know being in this position, we have a voice, we have a say in the conversation, so it makes it easier for us to advocate for our Airmen.

**Q: What are your goals as First Sergeants and what do you hope to accomplish before you move on?**

A: MSgt DeWitt: The goal of a First Sergeant for me is I want to make a difference. Obviously not very measurable but I want to be able to make an impact. I remember what it was like to be an Airman, I felt like I didn't really have a voice, and nobody really knew who I was. I like to get around and get to know people the best I can. Rather it be Airmen in my unit or Airmen across the base. MSgt Melendez: I would agree with that. Make an impact, make a difference in someone's life. Whatever it is that's important to them, may not seem very big at the time, but for us I like to treat it as big because for that person, that individual, in that moment in time it may be a huge crisis for them, which others may not view it that way. Just knowing that I invested in them and invested my time and efforts into them... even just getting a 'thank you' from one of my Airmen goes a long way for me. I don't need recognition to know that I'm doing my job.



**Q: Is First Sergeant where you wanted to be or is it a position that you ended up in?**

A: MSgt DeWitt: From when I joined, I don't think I thought about being a First Sergeant until four years ago. I was interested in it when one of my supervisors went and did the additional duties and held the phone. I would listen to his stories when he came back and thought, "That sounds kind of neat, actually." Once I got here to Cannon, I went to my First Sergeant and decided to jump headfirst into it and start holding the phone, to see what it was like, and it definitely hooked my interest. It's something I enjoy doing.

MSgt Melendez: For me it was about eight years ago. I wanted to become an additional duty First Sergeant. I was able to do it for about a year. But I got picked up to be a military training instructor instead. When I went down to Basic Military Training (BMT) and did that job for three and a half years, that's something that pushed me to want to work with people. So, when I came back into my career field as a maintainer, I knew that that's not where my heart and passion was, and I wanted to do something that continued with helping people. I applied at that point, and I was selected my first go-round.

**Q: The First Sergeants again this year are working with the Angel Arms Program, can you tell me more about that?**

A: MSgt Melendez: This is a program run by one of the local individuals that works through the Central Baptist Church, she started it back in 2011. The first year that it came about, they sent one Airman home, that was the starting point and from there it picked up a lot of speed. Since they started the program back in 2011, they've sent over 300 Airmen home. This year, we're up to 61 Airmen we're sending home. We sent 43 last year. All the funds come from the local community and there's donations made by local businesses. Then that pot of money just goes to sending our Airmen home for the holidays. Some of them haven't been home for over a year, if not longer. We've even been able to send individuals home that are going internationally, as well. They do support that also.

MSgt DeWitt: Mrs. Esther was able to

start with that one individual that was sent home. She did pay for it out of pocket. She felt it was a calling to her. The next year some people heard about it that were friends or family they pitched in and that's why they were able to send so much more. It just continued to grow and grow. Then businesses got involved

**Q: Who started this project, what was their vision and how are you working to carry out those goals?**

A: MSgt Melendez: Mrs. Esther Steinle, she was the one that broke ground on this program. She's the one that's been the point of contact this whole entire time, through these last eleven years now. We just want to continue that vision that she had and keep the program going because it one of our big pieces of being a First Sergeant is taking care of your people. What better way to take care of your people then to send them home for the holidays free of charge to them?

MSgt DeWitt: Once the individuals come back from their time home, there is a nice dinner banquet in January where the military member will go in full-service dress and, if possible, bring pictures of the time they spent with their family and just tell their story. Usually, it includes all the people in the local community that donated funds to the Angel Arms program. It gives them the ability to see what their donation was able to bring to other people.

**Q: What impact do you see in the Airmen that get to go home?**

A: MSgt Melendez: For me I see it as a huge morale builder to them. Sometimes with our younger Airmen, we know what they make, and we know that the price of everything today it's very expensive. I think it resets them so when they come back their energized and rejuvenated to return to duty after being away from home for so long.

MSgt DeWitt: That and usually a bit more excited knowing that they're a part of something that outside entities, outside the military family, support and want to take care of. Like Ruben [MSgt Melendez] said it's expensive to go home. A lot of these individuals have a spouse or a spouse and a kid or just single individuals themselves, and that money can accumulate very quickly. Some of these individuals are homesick because they've been close to home until they join the military. Now

they're at their new first unit and they haven't seen their family in one, two, three years because they haven't been able to afford to do it.

**Q: How are people nominated or enrolled in the program?**

A: MSgt DeWitt: The focus of individuals that we're trying to get in contact with are single Airmen, Staff Sergeant and below that haven't seen their family in over a year. We try to reach out to them. Usually, it's either the individuals or supervisors will nominate those individuals up. We just need to know where they're wanting to go to, what dates they're wanting to travel, when is the last time they saw their family or their reasoning to want to use this program. Then just make sure that their leave is approved as best it can. Once that happens, Mrs. Esther will take that person's name, reach out to them and start coordinating everything. She coordinates everything. From what dates they're okay with, she talks them through the process, she books all the tickets for them, if it's an international flight she'll meet them at the airport because there's a bit more of a process that's required. She takes care of that Airman. She considers them her children so she wants to make sure they make it through the process as easy as possible.

**Q: Any last comments or thoughts?**

A: MSgt DeWitt: I'm very happy Mrs. Esther continues to do this program. It's a unique opportunity that I haven't seen anywhere else I've been. I think it's just really awesome that she's willing to do this every single year and just continue to build on it.

MSgt Melendez: I agree. I've already had a couple First Sergeants tell me they've never heard of this program before. I think there's things that are similar to it but not named this. I think this is unique to this location and for it to be in this location is fantastic because we're kind of in an isolated location compared to a lot of other Air Force bases. It's a lot more beneficial and it means more to the Airmen here for them to have a program that cares about them and that they're serving and wearing a uniform. Thankful for Mrs. Esther for sure. I'm sure she'll keep this program running as long as she possibly can.

