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P.O.W. MOM'S ANGUISH

After Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl's 3 years in Afghanistan, parents plead: Don't forget

Jani Bergdahl breaks down at home in Hailey, Idaho, as she talks about her son, America's only current prisoner of war.

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GET HIM HOME SAFE

Parents plead for return of soldier son, America's only current POW

By Erik German



PLAY VIDEO

— Video by Vivek Kemp and Erik German

HAILEY, Idaho — For the first time, the parents of America's only current prisoner of war have opened up on camera about the nearly three anguished years they've spent waiting for their son to come home.

"The first six months are horrible because you don't know what to expect," Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl's mother, Jani, told The Daily. "I don't know the people that have him but we truly pray that he is surrounded by good Muslims."

Bergdahl was stationed in a remote corner of Afghanistan's Paktika province when insurgents captured him on June 30, 2009. The exact circumstances of his capture remain unclear. Early reports said he'd wandered from his base, but in a video released later by insurgents, Bergdahl said he'd been grabbed after falling behind on a patrol.

Authorities have advised Bergdahl's family to keep a low profile in hope that diminished at-



tention would increase the likelihood of his release, but as the third anniversary of his captivity approaches, his parents said they've become frustrated with the seemingly stalled efforts to free their son and the way his situation has faded from public view.

"It's been three years and we felt we had to change our tactics," Jani Bergdahl said. "We're speaking now to let the American people know there is a P.O.W. in Afghanistan."

The Bergdahls live on 40 acres of pasture shadowed by a sage-covered ridge — a peaceful spot they sought out to raise their daughter and son. Bowe's father, Robert, hand-built their compact home out of cinder blocks and stucco.

"We see ourselves as a pioneer family, really," said Robert Bergdahl. "We're pretty independent."

Press Jani Bergdahl and she'll tell you she likes Ron Paul, but politics aren't really the family's thing. Neither is being the focus of media attention, or giving interviews. But they wanted to let the world know what an extraordinary young man their son is.

As a kid, Bowe, now 26, demonstrated a keen intelligence, devouring books almost as voraciously as he took up sports, they said. He paraglided and fenced, as well as riding everything from skis to motorcycles to skateboards. "Just about everything he did, he excelled at," Robert Bergdahl said.

He joined the Army out of a desire to see the reality of the Afghan war for himself, and out of the conviction he could do something to help.

"It was a moral, ethical decision," his father said. "And I wasn't going to dissuade him from what he believed was a very important mission."

So far, the only contact the Bergdahls have had with their son has been through the three videos his captors have posted online. Only a private first class when captured, he has been promoted twice since.



Then-Pvt. 1st Class Bowe Bergdahl is shown in a video after his capture in Afghanistan nearly three years ago. Reuters

"He looks really well in the videos," Jani Bergdahl said. "He has pens in his pockets. Which means they're letting him write ... which is very important to him."

"Nobody knows what happened," Robert Bergdahl said. "No one will know until Bowe comes home."

The small bright spot in their ordeal has been the outpouring of support from their hometown of Hailey. Signs and yellow ribbons adorn light posts, trees and stores throughout the community's compact downtown. Someone even tied ribbons to all electric poles along a road near the Bergdahls' home. "They get tied new every year, sometimes twice a year," Jani Bergdahl said. "We've had amazing support in this community."

As heartfelt as they are, all of these efforts remain a sad reminder that, so far, the Bergdahls are still suffering. "It's not post-traumatic stress syndrome, it's just plain traumatic stress syndrome," Robert said. "There's no post about it."

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