


It's been eleven years since Ursula Palmer became a Gold Star wife, the widow of a fallen service member, and in honor of her late husband, Army Sergeant First Class Collin Bowen, she will share her emotional story of overcoming inconsolable anguish and finding happiness after tragedy at the 30th Anniversary of the PBS National Memorial Day Concert. (<http://www.pbs.org/national-memorial-day-concert/home/>)

 Heather Newgen Profile Photo (./How Gold Star Wife Ursula Palmer Found Love After Tragedy - voluntourist_files/Heather-Icon.Original-mini-2.jpg)By: Heather Newgen | Twitter: @hnavoluntourist (<https://twitter.com/hnavoluntourist>)

In 2008, SGT Collin Bowen was nearing the end of a 15 month tour in Afghanistan. He was just a couple of weeks away from returning home when he volunteered for one more mission. "At 1:32 in the afternoon my phone rang and I hear on the other side, "Mrs. Bowen this is colonel..." I couldn't hear anything else. My whole world turned upside down and I knew something terrible had happened." she recalled.



Ursula and Collin met when she was teaching a Spanish masters course in Maryland.

"It was my first day as a teacher and I was nervous because I barely spoke English," she laughed. "My class was full of 18 and 19-year-olds, then this older gentleman arrived. He was the type of man I like—not too

Related Articles

Exclusive: Denyce Graves on performing at the National Memorial Day Concert and President Biden giving her a shoutout in his inaugural speech
(https://www.iamthevoluntourist.com/post_type=post&p=8232)

How Joe Morton is paying tribute to Black soldiers at the 32nd Annual National Memorial Day Concert
(https://www.iamthevoluntourist.com/post_type=post&p=8222)

Former Vietnam nurse Diane Carlson Evans will be honored this Memorial Day
(https://www.iamthevoluntourist.com/post_type=post&p=8208)

tall, blond, nice. It put me at ease. Someone my age and handsome.”

But, after that first time he never returned. She got word that he had transferred to another class because hers was too difficult. The following semester was a much different story, however.

(<https://www.iamthevoluntourist.com/>)

“First person arriving to my class was him. He sat right there in the front row. He always did his homework and would participate. After the semester was over we started talking and then going out,” she said.

The pair dated for about a year before they tied the knot. A couple years later they welcomed their daughter Gabriela and were married for over five years.

When SGT Bowen was deployed, “He called me every single day until December 31st. On January 1st he didn’t call and I thought his phone died or there’s no reception in the area. I gave myself a lot of excuses,” she explained. “Then January 2nd came. I went back to work and again I didn’t hear anything from him. I remember sitting at my desk looking at my computer screen feeling this deep sadness. It wasn’t a premonition, just sadness. I again tried to convince myself it was just my mind, nothing is happening and he’ll call soon.”

As his family was counting down the days until his return home, a new team was heading out on a mission. SGT Bowen knew the terrain better and he wanted them to have an experienced guide, so he volunteered to go. Although the mission itself was a success, the end result was not. As the team was en route back to camp insurgents were waiting for them.

“There were three humvees and as soon as they saw the first humvee they detonated the bomb. Because it takes some time for the signal to go through to the IED, it didn’t hit the first one, it hit the second one and that’s where he was,” Palmer revealed. “There were four people in the humvee. Two died immediately and the medic was actually driving and Collin was in the passenger seat. Both of them survived. The medic survived for seven days only, and Collin was severely burned. He was able to survive for two and a half months,” Palmer said.



SGT Bowen went through 15 surgeries and was kept alive on life support for weeks. As his condition worsened and the realization set in that wasn't he going to recover, his family knew it was time to let go.


"It was up to me to sign those papers to disconnect him. I talked to him mom first before signing anything. I was right by his side. The nurse put a blanket on his chest. I laid there while everyone else surrounded the bed. We waited until we heard the flat line," Palmer said.

At just 38-years-old SGT Bowen died. He is survived by his two daughters from a previous marriage Erin Bowen, 25, Katelyn Bowen, 22 and his daughter Gabriela, who is now 14, but was only three-years-old when her father passed.

"The first two years were the hardest. I know that people mean well when they say, "Do you need anything?" but we don't even know what we need, especially in the beginning. We're so consumed with grief that we're probably not going to reach out and say, "Hey I need this." Maybe you're able to see that we need a night out or a few hours for ourselves or a dinner so we don't have to cook one night. If people see something that we need that will make our life a little easier even if it's just for a couple of hours just go ahead and do it," Palmer poignantly stated.

It took some time, but slowly Palmer started to turn her situation into an opportunity to help other Gold Star families.

"I had the opportunity to get involved with the Gold Star Wives. You go from being the one who receives the help to the one who offers the help and that's really helpful as you go through your journey. Then I got involved with another non-profit Links to Freedom (<https://www.linkstofreedom.org/>), which uses golf as a rehabilitation tool for wounded warriors, disabled veterans, their families, as well as Gold Star children. That has been healing because I've been able to be closer to help. I'm seeing how they change. They can adapt again and improve and feel better," Palmer told The Voluntourist.


“When you show someone who is just coming into this reality who doesn’t think there’s going to be a tomorrow because the pain is so strong, and you show them that there is a future, it is therapeutic. Other Gold Star families have had worse situations than mine and have gone through it and not had a hard time moving forward and being able to proceed. The combination of all of that helps me and helps me help others.”
(<https://www.iamthevolunteer.com/>)

She added, “When Collin died it wasn’t so much that he wasn’t going to be with me, but that my daughter wouldn’t have father. There was no way for me to truly instill in her what a father can, but I had to do whatever I could. I moved forward because of her. I could not just stay depressed and not being able to function because I have her. I tried to look for what helped me in terms of grieving. For me, it was better to try to find things where she could have fun. Just do things where I could be distracted from my pain and I could see her enjoying life. He would want her to enjoy her life. There have been many Gold Star children that killed themselves because they weren’t able to get through the pain. I wanted to make sure I was aware of my daughter’s feelings and show her that there’s life. That along with me being able to step into the helper shoes really helped me find that meaning and help me move forward.”

As Palmer began to find meaning again, she also found something else.

“I was really really blessed to find love again. From the first moment, he was a great father figure. He didn’t have any kids and some people just have in them being good with kids, he was so natural. I think that has helped Gabriela become the strong, confident woman that she is. Unfortunately, not everyone has that opportunity. I’ve seen many widows who’ve gotten into bad relationships with guys who just want some of the money that Gold Star widows get from their late husbands. Just bad situations.”

For the last seven years she’s been married to Timothy Palmer, who is also in the service.

“He was introduced to me by one of Collin’s good friends. That’s how I met him. With his family they are always right there by us any time we honor Collin. There is no jealousy or apprehension of any kind. They’re always there. My current husband’s mom calls him her “adoptive son.” Their heart is so pure and wonderful. Our new family honors Collin in any way they can.”



While Palmer wasn't comfortable at first having the spotlight on her at the upcoming PBS event, she's looking forward to honoring her late husband whom she calls "a hero."

"He was a great warrior and cared deeply for his friends. He always put his friends first. If he needed help, he was going to be there. What happened when he died was all that he had given to others came back to us. All his friends immediately surrounded us and anything we needed they were there for us. That gives testimony to who he was and what he did for his friends. If anything is to be said about Collin it's that he was a great warrior and someone who was respected among his peers."

As for what others can do for Gold Star families, Palmer wants people to join the fight in removing the SBP-DIC offset or "widow tax."

"Unmarried Gold Star widows are entitled to receive two payments. SBP from the Department of Defense that is comparable to an annuity the service member paid into (like a life insurance). And if they died while in active duty or due to a service related issue, they receive DIC from the VA. However, federal law requires a \$1 reduction in SBP annuity for each \$1 received in DIC, leaving most widows with just one payment. Widows who remarry after age 57 and surviving spouses of government civilians are exempt from the offset. In my case I lost it all when I decide to remarry. However, as a spouse of a military service member, after he retires, and if I survive him, I will be back in the same situation. My husband's earned or paid SBP will not be provided fully because of the offset."

To see more of Palmer's story, watch the 2019 National Memorial Day Concert on Sunday, May 26 at 8/7c on PBS.

VOLUNTOURIST | AM THE



I AM THE

RESPONSIBLE VOLUNTEERING + TRAVEL

(<https://www.iamthevoluntourist.com/>)

RESPONSIBLE VOLUNTEERING + TRAVEL

(<https://www.iamthevoluntourist.com/>)

The Voluntourist promotes responsible and sustainable voluntourism, provides the knowledge, motivation and inspiration to anyone who wants to make a difference close to home or while falling in love with another corner of the world.

CONTACT US

Do you have any questions or comments for The Voluntourist staff? There are several ways to get in contact with us.

- info@iamthevoluntourist.com (<mailto:info@iamthevoluntourist.com>)
- Facebook
(<https://www.facebook.com/The-Voluntourist-152316794838183/>)
- Instagram
(<https://www.instagram.com/iamthevoluntourist/>)
- YouTube
(<https://www.youtube.com/user/iamthevoluntourist>)

INFORMATION

- [Our Team](#)
- [Our Standards](#)
- [Volunteer Reviews](#)
- [Contact us](#)

INSTAGRAM

 [Follow on Instagram \(https://www.instagram.com/iamthevoluntourist/\)](https://www.instagram.com/iamthevoluntourist/)

[Terms of Use \(https://www.iamthevoluntourist.com/term-of-use/\)](https://www.iamthevoluntourist.com/term-of-use/) |
[Privacy Policy \(https://www.iamthevoluntourist.com/privacy-policy/\)](https://www.iamthevoluntourist.com/privacy-policy/) |
[Content Guidelines \(https://www.iamthevoluntourist.com/content-guidelines/\)](https://www.iamthevoluntourist.com/content-guidelines/)