

Wife, mother plan garden for fallen soldier

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By KARIN SHAW ANDERSON / The Dallas Morning News

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Friends have started asking Christine Newman if she plans to leave Rockwall.

"They say, 'The two most horrific things that could happen to you did happen after you moved here,' " she said.

But Mrs. Newman isn't budging. Instead, she's expanding her household.

She moved from Maryland in 2005 – before her husband's job transfer to the Dallas area went into effect – because their home had sold sooner than expected.

Six weeks after she set up house near Lake Ray Hubbard, Peter Newman, still in Maryland, suffered a fatal heart attack on a treadmill. He was 49.

"I couldn't see moving back, because I'd be going back to a bunch of memories," Mrs. Newman said.

She had become rooted in Texas a few months earlier when word came that her oldest son, 1st Lt. Gwilym J. Newman, would be stationed in Fort Hood, Texas, instead of Tennessee as planned. His wife, Samantha Newman, had given birth to Christine's first grandchild in April 2005.

Before Lt. Newman left for Iraq in October, he planted two pampas grass bushes near his mother's backyard pool. The shrubs were to be a living memorial to his father.

Now, Lt. Newman's wife and mother are working to expand the flowerbed in memory of him. Lt. Newman was killed April 12 by a sniper's bullet during a foot patrol in Iraq. He would have turned 25 on April 27, the birthday he shared with his son, Gwilym Alexander Newman, now 2.

Dennis Williams, a family friend, helped the lieutenant's wife and mother start expanding the garden when he was in town for Lt. Newman's memorial service, but Mr. Williams had to return to New Jersey before the work could be completed.

He's hoping others who have the strength to dig holes and know about Texas soil will step forward to help the women finish the garden.

Already, a metal cross stands near a few flowers and shrubs planted in Lt. Newman's memory. The women hope to line the edges of the back yard with fruit trees and rose bushes. A bench will sit near the cross.

"It's a place to go and think about him," Samantha Newman said.

A few months ago, she and young Gwilym, whom she sometimes calls Alex, left their home near Fort Hood to stay with her husband's mother.

"She was having a hard time being by herself," Christine Newman said.

Lt. Newman also found comfort in having his wife and mother in the same house.

"He didn't have to worry about me or the baby," Samantha Newman said.

HOW TO HELP

Christine and Samantha Newman need volunteers to share their knowledge of Texas soil and help them dig holes for plants and trees in a garden to honor 1st Lt. Gwilym J. Newman, who was killed in Iraq April 12. Contact the family by e-mailing calibeen@gmail.com.

With Lt. Newman's death, the arrangement has become permanent.

The night the family got the news, Christine and her daughter, Brittany, had gone to see Christine's youngest son, Patrick, at the opening of his high school play.

Samantha had put her son to bed and was alone with a book when two Army officers came to the door.

"I said, 'You've got to be kidding,' " she remembered.

She insisted that they must be looking for the wife of another Lt. Newman. "I said: 'Not mine. I talked to him yesterday.' "

Usually, Lt. Newman would contact his wife at the end of a mission. Sometimes it was an e-mail containing the letters "I M O K." Other times, he'd call.

The messages had become more important after Lt. Newman's unit lost three soldiers a few months ago. But when she didn't hear from him on April 12, Samantha Newman assumed he was simply busy with other duties.

"Nobody else was killed" in the attack, she said, giving in to tears. "Nobody else was hurt, and I'm thankful for that. Those guys were everything to him."

She regrets that her son won't have his own memories of Lt. Newman's humor – the times he urged his mother, sister and wife all to become platinum blondes – or his passion – the times he made his wife cakes that were too rich to eat, surprised her with ball gowns and sent bunches of exotic flowers.

But Samantha Newman plans to tell young Gwilym the stories about his father. She'll do it near the garden memorial.

"It's a place to show Alex when he gets older," she said. "He never really got to know him, but this will keep his memory alive to help him know who he was. I think this will do it."