

Voice of a Guardsman: Soldier shares her song

Story by U.S. Army Sgt. James Sims
139th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment

SPRINGFIELD -- The little girl climbed the stairs to her room, shut the door and the world faded away as she grabbed her hairbrush and took the stage before an imaginary audience of thousands of screaming fans.

For as long as she can remember, Staff Sgt. Jennifer Kohany of Chicago, an intelligence analyst with Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 33rd Brigade Support Battalion in Champaign, has been singing in front of the mirror in her room growing up in Valhalla, New York or a stadium filled with thousands of people before various military functions and sporting events.

"I can't remember not hearing Jenny sing," said Debbie Kohany of Oak Lawn, Jennifer's mother. "She was in chorus from first grade all the way through graduation of high school. I would so love hearing her sing at home when she was in her room, whether it was opera, country or rock. When Jen sings her face lights up and her eyes sparkle. You can see how much she loves to sing."

Kohany continued her passion into college while attending Columbia College in Chicago.

"In college I was involved with Columbia College's chorus, and considered a major in vocal performance, but decided instead to major in American Sign Language interpretation," said Kohany.

Almost 200 years ago, after witnessing the bombardment of Fort McHenry, Francis Scott Key penned the words to a poem called "Defense of Fort McHenry." The poem was later set to the tune of "The Anacreontic Song" a British drinking song written by John Stafford Smith, a tune already popular in the United States.

The combination of the two would soon become a well-known American patriotic song. It was not until 1931, by congressional resolution, that the Star-Spangled Banner became the national anthem.

"When I was in basic training, one of the drill sergeants in my platoon emphasized the importance of knowing patriotic staples, to include the Pledge of Allegiance, 'God Bless America,' and 'The Star Spangled Banner,' in addition to the basic warrior skills," said Kohany.

While in basic training, Kohany was randomly chosen and asked if she knew the National Anthem. Having grown up in a patriotic family, in addition to participating in choir, she did.

"They called me to the front of the 'war room,' and called everyone to attention while I sang," said Kohany. "The drill sergeants stood there in shock that not only did I know the words, but I actually knew how to sing as well."

From that moment Kohany has been called out by her fellow Soldiers who have knowledge of her ability, and has been asked to sing at different events.

Kohany was part of the Illinois Army National Guard's largest call-up since World War II and deployed with the 33rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team (IBCT) to Afghanistan in 2008.

While deployed the control, communications and computer systems section hosted a contest called Phoenix Idol showcasing the talent of Soldiers serving overseas as part of Task Force Phoenix VIII.

"A good friend of mine, Staff Sergeant Adam Gordon, was the emcee of Phoenix Idol and asked if I would come out on New Year's Eve and participate," said Kohany, "I obliged, with no intention of entering the competition because I had a pretty hectic schedule and didn't really have the time to learn and practice music for each weeks category."

Kohany did not win the contest but was noticed by several Soldiers on Camp Phoenix and it was through this that she was introduced to Tom Negovan, a reporter for WGN Chicago, while he was visiting Camp Phoenix to do a three-part series on Afghanistan, said Kohany.

"(Negovan) interviewed me, and asked if I would have any interest in singing at a Cubs game when I returned back to the states," said Kohany. "Sure enough, we stayed in touch, and as soon as I had a number to call, I was receiving a call from a Cubs publicist, asking if I'd be available to sing for the opening."

Although growing up a Yankee fan, Kohany said she is also a Chicago Cubs fan. She said singing in front of 40,000 people, with her friends and family present, was amazing.

Patriotic songs have always held a deeper meaning to veterans and servicemembers in the U.S. military and their loved ones, said Staff Sgt. John Robinson of Champaign, who served as a chaplain assistant for the 33rd IBCT while in Afghanistan with Kohany.

"Listening to someone who has given their blood, sweat and tears for this country and then so passionately sings our National Anthem, gives me chills, every time," said Robinson "I believe every time someone



Photo by U.S. Army Sgt. James Sims, 139th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment
Staff Sgt. Jennifer Kohany of Chicago sings the National Anthem at the retirement ceremony for Brig. Gen. Ronald Morrow, the deputy commander of the Illinois Army National Guard, Jan. 22 at the President Abraham Lincoln Hotel and Conference Center in Springfield.

like Jen sings it, she does it as an honor to our Nation and for those who have paid the ultimate sacrifice."

The most meaningful performance came in June of 2005, though not on the happiest note, said Kohany.

"My mom had been engaged to one of the most incredible people I've ever met, Eamonn," said Kohany. "They had put off getting married while I was in college, but because of the closeness of our relationship, I referred to him as my stepdad. My mom manages a small Irish Bar on the south side of Chicago. Every so often, I would stop in on a Friday night when Eamonn could persuade me to sing on karaoke night. He was really the only person who could charm me into singing there, and always asked me to sing 'Angel' by Sarah McLachlin; both mine and his favorite song."

That January, a friend of Eamonn's had passed away and he asked Kohany to sing a couple of songs at the wake. After the church ceremony, someone approached Eamonn, and complimented the voice of his 'daughter.'

"He acknowledged his pride, and it was

one of the prouder moments in my own life," said Kohany. "Little did I know that only six months later, Eamonn would pass away, while at work, at 1 o'clock in the morning."

"It was one of the hardest things that I've ever had to do, but I knew it would mean the world to my mom and family," she said. "So at his memorial ceremony, I sang 'Angel.' That certainly wasn't my favorite performance, but it was the most monumental. It was hard, and I knew that if I could get through the song that I could do nearly anything and I know that he would've been proud."

Kohany said she has always loved singing, from singing in her car, at school, in church or at a karaoke bar.

Kohany's mother has encouraged her to pursue a career in singing, but Kohany said she sings for the love of singing, not the love of fame.

"I do it because I enjoy it, not because I'm trying to get discovered or anything like that," said Kohany. "Since high school, she has urged me to pursue a singing career, but I've found my niche with the military, and I'm pretty happy with that."

Airmen serve their country by playing music

Story by U.S. Army Spc. Jason Dorsey
139th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment

PEORIA -- As the old adage goes, "music has charms to sooth a savage beast, to soften rocks, or bend a knotted oak."

With the title Airman, many may envision a pilot and flight crew, but there are many other ways Airmen serve their country with a double bassoon instead of a fighter jet.

With more than 150 different occupations in the National Guard, there is only one job that allows a servicemember to utilize an instrument instead of a weapon.

That group of talented citizen-Airmen is part of the Air National Guard Band of the Midwest.

"Each time I sing the armed forces melody while the band plays, it's such an honor to see the veterans stand to their feet," said Air Force Tech. Sgt. Keisha Gwin-Goodin of Chicago, a vocalist with the U.S. Air Force Band of Mid-America.

The mission of the Illinois Air National Guard's 566th Air Force Band is unique among military units.

The Airmen's skills reflect both art and dedication to service in patriotic performance.

"Our mission is multi-faceted," said



Photo by U.S. Army Spc. Jason Dorsey, 139th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment
The Illinois Air National Guard's 566th Air Force Band plays during a performance. The band performs all over the globe, but has had recent concentrations on morale boosting concerts and memorial services in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Air Force Maj. Bryan Miller, commander and conductor of the Illinois Air National Guard's 566th Air Force Band.

"We are a powerful resource, everything from morale, welfare and recreation to recruiting internally, to improving community relations and portraying a positive image for our nation's military."

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has had recent concentrations on morale boosting concerts and memorial services in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"With so many military missions in action, we will construct and deploy the most appropriate ensemble needed for the mission," said Miller.

"We accomplish this with any number of products to include ceremonial and concert

bands, jazz and rock bands, vocalists, buglers and anything else that could best serve a specific mission."

Alongside performing for deployed troop operations, the 566th Air National Guard Band also lifts the spirits of civilians by performing locally at schools, nursing homes and surrounding organizations.

"The 566th Air National Guard Band is an essential column to the military public affairs structure," said Tech. Sgt. Jack Kinsella of Mahattan, Ill.

"Performing not only inspires patriotism, but it most importantly strengthens relationships with a variety of publics to enhance the reputation of the fighting forces of America."

With 11 Air National Guard bands located in the continental United States, each band is accountable for supporting units in a multi-state area of responsibility.

While performing a diverse line up of patriotic ensembles, the Illinois Air National Guard band has established and maintained an integral root within military history.

Miller said, "I do believe in our mission, whether it's performing for deployed troops in theatre, stateside or for the citizenry, we have the unique opportunity to reach out and touch people."