

1. What does Memorial Day mean to you, your organization, and the families you serve?

For me, Memorial Day is a day to remember those who have made the ultimate sacrifice in serving our country and the impact it has on those they have left behind. I was just talking to a friend about how small our current military is and what that means. Our current all-volunteer force is less than 1% of the US population and the number of active-duty US military personnel has fallen over 37% since 1980. This places the responsibility of defending the freedoms for us all on a small demographic of people. Today there are fewer people who personally know someone serving which can create a disconnect in identifying or understanding the community and the culture. I can imagine that as a result it also means that the true meaning of Memorial Day becomes more abstract and lost.

If we look closer, 60% of veterans under 40 have an immediate family member who served. Among new recruits, 30% have a parent in the military, and 70% report a family member in the armed forces. The military, in many ways, has become a generational career path. For our organization the meaning of Memorial Day hits closer to home.

2. What do you find most gratifying about leading Kids Rank?

According to a 2021 Military Family Lifestyle Survey only 30% of military families feel a sense of belonging to their civilian communities. The Kids Rank evaluation findings showed that 80% of our participants stated that they felt more connected. This is a great impact point as it shows that participation in Kids Rank nearly triples the feelings of belonging compared to the national survey. What we do in building relationships and connections with our military kids, families and the civilian communities where they live bring me the most satisfaction. We support the kids and families from a holistic perspective understanding the larger implications that so many of the kids that we are serving will potentially join the armed forces themselves. We want to ensure that they feel a sense of belonging and give them a sturdy foundation to move ahead in any of their future endeavors. I am proud that through our various programs both specifically for the kids and more broadly for the entire families, in partnership with so many of our civilian friends, we create a space where they feel safe and seen.

We are unique in that our member demographics mirror that of our armed forces and include significant populations of members of various identities across a culturally, nationally, and globally diverse spectrum. From racial and ethnic minorities and first-generation children to LGBTQ+ individuals and a range of socio-economic backgrounds, our network of members comprises a vast community of identities who all share the challenges of military service. Yet, it is precisely these differences that serve as the foundation for an SEL-based approach to developing our cohorts as resilient, empathetic future leaders in their communities.

3. Is there anything else you would like us to know about Kids Rank and the families you serve?

Kids Rank was created to fill the gap in resources and support for military kids who famously face unique social and academic challenges as a result of frequent moves, parental deployments, and the derivative effects of isolation and integration into new schools and communities that often follow.

Kids Rank is the only organization of its kind providing in-person programming to military-connected children; developing the elements of service-mindedness and compassionate leadership across a powerful generation; and providing tangible, engaging programming and a community of support for a population whose unique social and emotional needs so often go overlooked. Our success lies in recognizing the power of community-making and our commitment to investing in military-connected children as the next generation of leaders.

As I reflect on Memorial Day, at the same time I have an eye towards the future on those who will next join the armed forces knowing that many of them will be our military children. What I want people to walk away thinking about is how can we all be better neighbors? How can we bridge the gap among our military and civilian families? How can we support this small niche of individuals who one day may make the ultimate sacrifice for us all.

Mission: *Kids Rank provides stability and support for military-connected children by nurturing social and emotional growth through connection, leadership, and community service.* Our mission is simple: to create a sense of community for military kids wherever they go.