

## Testimony of Steve Ellis

April 20, 2023

### H.B. 2146, *Oregon Gold Star Families Memorial Highway Act*

Chairman Manning, Vice Chair Thatcher and Members of the Committee, I appreciate the opportunity to testify today on H.B. 2146, a bill to designate the Oregon portion of U.S. Highway 30 the *Oregon Gold Star Families Memorial Highway*. I'm Steve Ellis, father of CPL Jessica Ellis, an Oregonian and highly decorated combat medic in the storied 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division who was killed in action in Iraq on May 11, 2008. Jessica is a graduate of Lakeview High School, Central Oregon Community College in Bend, and a former wildland firefighter with the US Forest Service. She rests in section 60 of Arlington National Cemetery. For fifteen years now, my wife Linda and I have been members of a group nobody really wants to be in...the long line of families that have borne the losses of those who died in the service of our country.

Our lives changed forever with a knock on the door that Mother's Day evening at our then, rural Baker County Oregon home. The image of those two class A Army uniforms in the porchlight when I opened the door that night is forever seared in my memory. For the most part, our country has moved on from the Iraq war....we never can. The same might be said for families like ours from other wars or conflicts such as Afghanistan, Vietnam, and Korea just to name a few from my lifetime. Over the years, some families like ours received such terrible news as impersonally as a telegram in the mailbox or delivered by say, a cab driver. This was likely, understandable during the two world wars. Interesting enough, I have read reports where such an impersonal notification process may have still occurred in the early part of the Vietnam war. During the 1860s, I read that a list of names of the missing and fallen was often posted at a public location in the community, which back then was how families normally received such horrible news.

So how did the term gold star family originate? During World War I, some families started displaying small banners in their windows or on a wall in their home or place of business that had a blue star for every immediate family member serving in the armed forces. If their service member died in service, the family replaced the blue star with a gold star. This really caught on during WWII when you could walk through almost any community in this nation and see banners in the windows of homes with blue stars, sometimes more than one that signified they had a family member, or members serving overseas in the armed forces. When the stars were changed to gold, it let the community know that the family's service member died or was killed in action while serving their country. *That tradition still exists today.* We had a blue star banner hanging in the window of our Baker County home for our daughter, just as my grandparents did for my father who fought in the European theatre during WW II.... until that fateful day came when we switched ours to gold.

Gold star families are a vital part of our country's military community and history. Even though gold star families have experienced a great loss, their ties to the military community remain

strong. The Army and others with close military ties continue to reach out to check on the well-being of our family to this day. We are grateful for this as I am sure other families like ours are.

Since Linda and I became members of this “club” we can never resign from, we are often approached by people at gas stations or in parking lots asking what “gold star family” means on our Oregon license plates. They often see four letters and connect the dots that they are a military related license plate, but more often than naught, it usually stops there. What such impromptu conversations have messaged to us is that many, if not most people outside of military families and veterans do not know what a gold star family is. We always used such instances as a welcome educational opportunity for those who asked.

We really aren't here today to discuss gold star license plates, but I used this example as a lead into this: Designating U.S. Highway 30 in Oregon as the Gold Star Families Memorial Highway is a fitting thing to do. *This designation would help many Oregonians learn and think about what a gold star family is, and the sacrifice and strength we represent.* It would also remind those traveling on highway 30 of the price that generations of American families have paid for the cause of freedom. It would clearly message that our great state of Oregon recognizes that in addition to those who died in the service of our country, no one has given more for the nation than the families of the fallen. Linda and I support H.B. 2146 and encourage the passage of this legislation.

In closing, Linda and I would like to take this opportunity to thank the legislature for naming a segment of state highway-140 in Lake County, Oregon as the CPL Jessica Ellis Fallen Hero Memorial Highway. We also thank the Oregon Department of Transportation for placing a most respectable designation sign along that highway west of Lakeview. I very much appreciate the opportunity to be part of this hearing today and welcome any questions that committee members might have.

Steve Ellis

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