



LISA LOCKHART IS RUNNING FOR ARMY PFC. KATIE M. SOENKSEN

19, of Davenport, Iowa; assigned to the 410th Military Police Company, 720th Military Police Battalion, 89th Military Police Brigade, Fort Hood, Texas; died May 2 in Baghdad of wounds sustained when an improvised explosive device detonated near her vehicle.

DAVENPORT, Iowa. May 10 -- The long black hearse did not belong in the picture, parked outside Davenport North High School on a day more suited to a picnic than a wake. As students spilled into the afternoon sunshine and did a double take, a family gathered to mourn an effervescent teenager taken too soon.

Pfc. Katie M. Soenksen, a 19-year-old soldier serving with the 410th Military Police Company, died last week in a Baghdad explosion not two years after she graduated from North High. She enlisted and wrote recently that being in Iraq "makes me realize how good we have it in America."

She was the 71st woman killed in Iraq -- 45 by hostile action -- and the 246th teenage soldier killed in Iraq or Afghanistan. With women serving in combat in unprecedented numbers, the number killed in action is higher than in previous wars, roughly triple the number of female casualties in Vietnam and the Gulf War combined.



Soenksen's death cut deeply in Iowa, which buried another 19-year-old soldier on Wednesday. In the Quad Cities, which straddle the Mississippi, 14 fighting men and women have been buried since the Iraq war began, breaking hearts and driving political attitudes.

Anger over Iraq was decisive in November, when the Democrats captured the 1st District congressional seat held by Republicans since 1978. Losing GOP candidate Mike Whalen said it was "the overwhelming issue," a predicament all too familiar to anxious Republican moderates who warned President Bush this week that patience with the war is waning.



But the days since a homemade bomb killed Soenksen have been more about pain and hugs than politics. Support for the family has been overwhelming. Hundreds of people streamed into the high school on Wednesday, the day before her military funeral, to offer comforting words and heartfelt embraces.

As lights on a signboard flashed, "We'll Miss You, Katie," one administrator said the experience of burying a student who had been so vibrant and alive was "very surreal."



When the news reached Davenport on May 2, Brandon Concannon Colter was with his best friend, Marco Torres, who had dated Soenksen for two years. They were riding bikes at the Bettendorf skate park when Torres's cellphone rang.

"It just got kind of silent," said Concannon Colter, 17, a senior in North High's Junior ROTC program. "He was like, 'I'll be all right. I'll be all right.' He got off the phone and he was [teed] off and sad.

"I said, 'What is it?' He said, 'Katie died.' It was a silent ride home."

Concannon Colter told his parents and his sister, but Soenksen's death did not compute.

"It was more shock than devastation. 'They're lying,' " he thought.

The next morning, when Gunnery Sgt. Greg Livingston drove into the school parking lot, his ROTC students burst from the doorway to tell him. He said it must be a bad rumor.





"I didn't want to believe it. The kids didn't want to believe it," said Livingston, a Marine who oversees three platoons of ROTC students. Later that morning, confirmation arrived. He addressed the young students, telling them this was the reality of war.

"Every day," he told them, "somebody's dying over there for us. She was willing to stand up and do what she believed in. We should be a grateful nation for what she did. If you live the right way, the correct way, I believe we'll all be together again."

Students were devastated. Many cried. Just two years earlier, Soenksen was a leader in the same room. The juniors and seniors knew her. Others remembered her stopping by school when she was home on leave, proud in her Army uniform.



"I'll always love her," said Livingston, his eyes reddening. "You can't forget her. She made you feel good, no matter what mood you were in. I'm a moody person, but she wasn't like that. She set the example for others to follow."

Monsignor James F. Parizek, who led a funeral Mass on Thursday at Our Lady of Victory Catholic Church, said Soenksen could be "strong-willed and stubborn," butting heads with people who stood in her way. She had an impulsive streak, marrying Army Spec. Benjamin Rowella, 30. It was six days before her deployment and two weeks after they met at a nightclub. At the Mass, he sat in the front pew.

Soenksen did not need to look far for military models. Her aunt, Air Force Lt. Col. Rose Ramirez, will soon complete her 34th year in uniform. She flew to Davenport with Soenksen's remains.

Ramirez was with the family on Wednesday as an army officer presented Soenksen's parents with a Purple Heart and a Bronze Star. The certificate said, "Her commitment contributed to our Nation's continual war on terror and her actions represented her dedication to the security of the United States of America."

Countless friends and more than a few strangers waited patiently in the North High auditorium for the chance to walk past Soenksen's ashes and a stage full of flowers and tributes. One who had not known her was Pat Clayton, who served as an Army MP in the 1970s, shortly after the Vietnam War ended. A government employee, she is seeking work in Iraq, to help the troops.

"If you don't feel it, you would never understand," Clayton replied when asked why. "Just a need to go over and support 'em. God and country. That's what it's all about."





Standing nearby, accepting condolences, was business teacher Jeff Manders. He coached Soenksen in basketball, soccer and softball from the time she was little. In high school, she played outfield and "had a cannon for an arm." He adored her.

"There are special kids you always remember. She was one of those kids," Manders said. "A fun kid. A teaser. She would tease her friends, tease her teachers, tease her coaches. Could Katie push it to the limit? Yeah, but she always had a way of coming back and making amends."

Soenksen's sudden death crystallized Manders's misgivings about the war. He said it will "definitely" influence his 2008 vote.

"This one hurts. This brings the war to your front door. It's no longer someone else's kid from a distant place. It's the kid next door who's died," said Manders. He described Iraq as "a mess."

"How are we going to get out of it? I saw the Republican debate: 'We can't pick up and leave or it would be chaos.' I understand, but what's the tradeoff? How many American lives are we going to lose? [I] just want to get the hell out of there."

Manders took in the auditorium that had been transformed into a funeral chapel, the line of people studying Soenksen's cheerful portraits, the scrapbooks of photos from childhood and from war, her softball trophies, the flowers, the simple wooden box holding her ashes.

"It's sad, but unfortunately I don't think this is going to be the end of it, not for Iowans, not for the United States."

Concannon Colter will turn 18 on Sept. 6. Three days later, he leaves for Marine Corps basic training and, he expects, deployment to Iraq. Since Soenksen died, his commitment to the military has grown stronger.

"It's helping her out," Concannon Colter said, "fighting for her cause, too."

