

Bellevue
Public
Schools



Alumni
Spotlight



Stephanie Himel-Nelson

Bellevue West, 1990

Welcome to our new Alumni Spotlight column where we shine a light on some of the amazing alumni that have graduated from Bellevue Public Schools!

In Bellevue, we value our relationship with the US military. Everyone who went to school in Bellevue knew someone whose mom or dad was serving our country.

Stephanie Himel-Nelson took her admiration of military families to a whole new level. She graduated from Bellevue West in 1990 and, since co-founding Blue Star Families nearly a decade ago, has helped millions of military families across the world.

Stephanie recently took some time to answer a few of our questions.

What schools did you attend in Bellevue and when did you graduate?

I attended Bellevue West High School and graduated in 1990.

Who were a couple of your favorite teachers?

Probably my favorite teachers were my AP English teacher, Mrs. Wolford, and my marketing teacher, Mr. Wenstrand. Mrs. Wolford taught me how to write and Mr. Wenstrand taught me the basics of marketing and both of them somehow made it lots of fun. These are probably the most important skills I learned in high school.

The irony is that, until Mrs. Wolford got ahold of me, I hated to write, but writing has been essential to my career. TV shows doesn't tell you that litigators spend a lot more time writing than they do in court. I've never seen a gripping episode of *The Good Wife* where the associates spent 62 hours crafting the perfect brief. But really, that's what I did. Then as a director for a national non-profit, everything I did revolved around effective communication. Now that I've left Blue Star Families, I'm a freelance communications consultant and writer. I spend 8-10 hours a day writing.

OK, I also really enjoyed Dr. Bob for Calculus, because math is fun, kids!

Did you have other family that graduated from BPS?

My brother, Bryan Himel, graduated from BWHS in 1994.

Where did you go to college?

I attended the University of Miami, the University of Nebraska at Omaha, and George Washington University Law School.



Mrs. Wolford, One of Stephanie's favorite teachers



Mr. Wenstrand, Another of Stephanie's favorites

Please share a little about your decision to become a lawyer.



Stephanie during her senior year

That is a long and complicated emotional journey! But I'll shorten it a bit and tell you that while I was in college, and until I went to law school, I was a volunteer for the Y's Women Against Violence program in Omaha. I started out answering calls to the crisis hotline for rape and domestic violence. Then I became a volunteer facilitator for a support group for women in violent relationships and an emergency room advocate for women and men who ended up in the hospital as the result of domestic violence or rape. It was eye opening. I realized what a sheltered, safe, and loving life I'd led and I also realized how easy it is to lose. Seeing that made me want to do more to make the world a better place.

You are a Co-Founder and served as Director of Communications of Blue Star Families. Could you please share with us what Blue Star Families is, why it is important, and how it began.

Growing up in Bellevue, we all knew someone in the military, if we weren't already part of military families. I grew up as an Air Force brat and I married a Navy man, so it was difficult for me to imagine not understanding how military life works or what war means to its families. But when I moved to DC to attend law school, it really opened my eyes to just how many people are completely disconnected from the military. In many parts of our country, there is a large gap between the military and civilian communities. People want to help, but they don't know how.



Blue Star Families began with 6 military spouses across the country discussing the challenges military families were facing in 2008. At that point we were 7 years into a war on two fronts. Military families weren't getting enough support; service members coming home from war weren't getting the support they needed either. At that point, no one was talking

about the long term effects of deployment after deployment on an entire generation of military kids. So we started Blue Star Families to give support to military families and to bring attention to the unique issues they face. In 2009, Blue Star Families created the first non-DoD comprehensive survey of military families. As a result, BSF's annual Military Family Lifestyle Survey informs Congress, the White House, and policy makers across the country. We were also able to team with for-profit organizations to help civilians engage meaningfully with the military family community. Working to bridge that disconnect I mentioned earlier, between military families and their larger civilian communities, is probably the most impactful work that BSF does.



Stephanie with some of her classmates at their 20th reunion.

When you were starting out, did you ever imagine it would grow like it did?

No! We officially incorporated BSF as a nonprofit in early 2009, in the midst of a giant economic downturn. On paper, it was the worst time possible to start a nonprofit and begin asking people for money. I guess in a way it was a good thing none of us really had any idea what we were doing at first, or we might not have taken the risk. But it turns out that we were at the forefront of a national wave of awareness of military families, veterans, and their issues. I'd like to think we had a lot to do with that. BSF is now the largest chapter-based military family support organization in the country.

Could you give a rough estimate of how many people you have helped through Blue Star?

Millions. For example, one of BSF's most popular programs, Blue Star Museums, allows military families to attend participating museums across the country for free each summer. More than 800,000 military family members have taken advantage of this, which is provided in partnership with the National Endowment for the Arts. That's just one program! BSF also has programs focused on military spouse employment, caregivers, military children, and civilians who

want to offer support to military families. You can find out more about BSF's impact and it's programs here: <https://bluestarfam.org/impact/>

You also are a writer whose work has appeared in such newspapers as the New York Times & The Washington Post. Could you talk a little about what sorts of topics you write about?

I've written about everything from parenting to politics. For quite some time, I was the host of a live chat for the Washington Post about military family life. I think my article in the New York Times about trying to explain war to kids was probably my most memorable and the hardest to write. But this is an issue that nearly every military family in the country has had to address over the last 17 years. You can read it here: <https://atwar.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/05/24/explaining-war-to-our-children/#more-34993>

Now, I spend a lot of time writing for other people, mostly lawyers and law firms. I write everything from law firm blog posts and website content, to legal briefs. It may not be as public as the New York Times or as exciting as litigation, but it allows me to spend a lot more time with my kids. I'm sure when they're out of the nest, I'll be back to those gripping 62-hour brief writing sessions.

Talk about one of your accomplishments that you are the most proud of.

I'm so proud of what we accomplished with Blue Star Families. I mean, it is amazing to think that this group will exist, doing good things, long after I'm gone. BSF is my biggest professional accomplishment so far. But I'm also pretty proud of my three boys. The most important thing I'll do is raise Hollis (14), Holden (12), and Hollen (4) to be good men. They might kick me out of the feminist club for saying that, but raising my boys is definitely my biggest personal accomplishment.



Stephanie and friends on a 1989 Orlando Band Trip

What message would you like to give to current students in Bellevue Public Schools?

I'd like to offer two pieces of advice:

1. Don't be afraid to take chances. Some of the biggest leaps I've taken - going to law school, starting a nonprofit, having a kid - have been the most rewarding.
2. Balance is hard. Once you head out into the world, it may seem like everyone around you is doing everything well, but they aren't. Every working parent has a hard time finding the right balance between home and work. We all feel guilty about it, the women and the men. Every stay-at-home parent feels conflicted about their choices too. Find out what works for you and don't worry about what your life looks like on Instagram.

Links

Blue Star Families Website:

<https://bluestarfam.org/>

About Us

The Alumni Spotlight is a recurring feature on the Alumni Association Facebook Page. If you know of a Bellevue graduate that we should shine the spotlight on, please reach out to us and they will be considered for a future column. Continue to invite your friends and family to Like and Follow our Alumni Association page: <https://www.facebook.com/BPSAlumni>



Stephanie as a member of the BWHS 1988-89 Cheerleading Squad