



John J. McKenna III and his wife, Karen

COVER STORY

John J. McKenna III

Fights for Veterans

By Jenna Caputo

Photos by MarkBolles.com

John J. McKenna III is a man that always wants to leave people with a smile on their faces. He is passionate about making a difference in the lives of others, especially when it comes to recognizing the sacrifices of our veterans. He tries to help alleviate the impact on families after a loved one is lost while in service to our country, in addition to raising awareness about veteran issues.

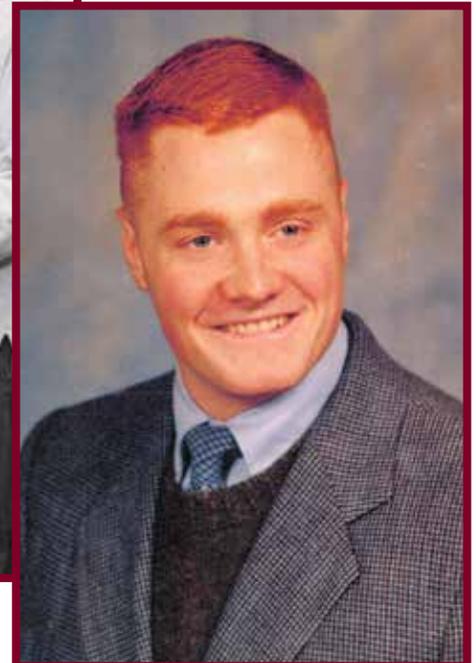
John comes from a family of veterans. He served

with the ARADROM C Battery 3rd Missile Battalion 51st Artillery Brigade in the US Army from 1963-1966. His uncle, PFC Robert E. McKenna, was a Marine in WWII and killed in the line of duty. His father-in-law, George Chlebig, was also a Marine, wounded during WWII. And his son, Captain John J. McKenna IV, was a Marine killed in the line of duty during his second deployment to Iraq in 2006.

Raised in Brooklyn, NY, the McKennas were a typical Irish-American family. John III enjoyed playing stick-ball, touch football, reading, evening stoop-sitting, and watching



At ease with new recruits, Jade Wando and Donovan Hendrickson, in the John J. McKenna IV Military Courtesy Room



John J. McKenna IV

the Brooklyn Dodgers play at Ebbels Field.

John IV, affectionately known as the “leprechaun,” since the redheaded kid with pointy ears and infectious smile was born on St. Patrick’s Day and had a face so Irish that adults would rub dollars on his forehead for good luck, also enjoyed playing street touch football and roller hockey in his early years. He then joined the Boy Scouts and served until he received his Eagle Scout award. He went on to college at Binghamton University, where he rowed with the crew team and earned his degree in history.

“John wanted to be a Marine from the time I can remember,” says John III. He knew all the movies and often played soldiers with his friends. After receiving his degree, John IV finally joined the Marines. He was on active duty until 2003, after serving in Afghanistan and through his first tour of Iraq. When he returned home, he joined the Reserves and was assigned to the 2nd Battalion 25th Marines Regiment based in Albany. John then joined the state police troopers since they represented all the qualities that he saw in the Marine Corps. He volunteered for a second tour to Iraq to stay with his men, and was soon deployed to Fallujah, Iraq.

While on foot patrol, they were hit by sniper fire. One of his men, Lance Corporal Michael Glover, was struck by the gunshots. John IV had his men throw smoke grenades around Glover to cover them while he rushed to his side to help. The sniper fire hit John IV as he was dragging Glover to safety. Both men died. John IV was awarded the Silver Star and is now buried in the Saratoga National Cemetery in Schuylerville after receiving a memorial service that included a block-long line of Marines, police officers and troopers; a police bagpipe and drum corps; and an honor

guard of Marines and troopers to carry the casket.

John III met his wife, Karen, at a church bazaar in Brooklyn, where they were both volunteering to run a gambling game. “I tell everyone I won her in a ‘dice game,’” he jokes. They had two children, John IV and Allyson, and now have granddaughter, Michaela. They moved to Clifton Park in 2006 to be near their children who had settled here in the Capital Region. John III had gained extensive computer and electronics experience while serving as a technician in the army, which proved very valuable with the merging computer services industry. He spent much of his career managing computer centers before deciding on a career change in 2000, when he completed his education courses and became a math and computer science teacher instead.

In 2009, a few friends approached him about a project to create a military courtesy room at the Albany International Airport. The grand opening of the Captain John J. McKenna IV Military Courtesy Room, located on the third floor observation deck, was celebrated on April 28, 2010 and doubled in size in 2011. This space is provided to offer military personnel and their families a warm and inviting environment with accommodations to help provide comfort and support while they are traveling. So far, over 37,000 military personnel and thousands of their family members have visited the room. They also offer free hotel accommodations through the generosity of the BBL Construction PFC David Taylor Miller Stranded Military Fund for stranded personnel to stay at the Hilton Garden Inn in Troy.

John and Karen also were actively involved with a project to construct and dedicate a Gold Star Families Memorial Monument in Lafayette Park, Albany. Gold Star Families was originally founded after WWI as the Gold Star Mother's Club – a way to honor and support the mothers of our armed forces killed in combat. Through the years, the group has evolved and been recognized in several different ways. A few years ago Congress recognized that all family members should be included and the name was changed once again. The McKenna's project, together with the efforts of other Gold Star Family members, the Tri-County Council

John is always looking for ways to help veterans and their families, and can often be found speaking to various groups on veteran issues. He still loves to read, especially about modern US history, and is also very involved with the Toastmasters club. He enjoys getting out to meet interesting, knowledgeable and caring people. "I find them at all times and at all types of venues," he says. "I have met many wonderful people while living in the Capital Region and especially Clifton Park. Our diverse ideas are what make us stronger. I enjoy meeting new people, fostering relationships with folks who understand the concept

that we are all passengers on this spaceship called Earth and we must all work to preserve it for those who follow us."

These days, John III goes by the nickname of "Yoda." The name developed when his granddaughter was born and they were trying to figure out what to call him. He wasn't into the usual Grandpa or Gramps kind of names and loved that Yoda is what stuck. In fact, it caught on so much that friends and family began calling him that too. Now when people ask where the Yoda came from, he just says it's because, "I am greying, and I am cuddly and adorable."

"[John IV and I] both have believed in having a strong and lighthearted view of life and we try to inject humor whenever we can. We take many things seriously, but avoid

taking ourselves too seriously. It will only hold you back in life." While he continues to bring smiles to all around him, John also fights every day for a cause that affects all of us in some way. He knows how important it is to remember that these men and women who have fought so hard for our country were once just kids that grew up with a moral and patriotic duty, and it is our job to take care of them when they get home. "I believe the spirits of our fallen are watching us, not from a distance, but up close, side by side, only a breath away, as we decide as a society how to help those who have been injured in body and mind by this war. Many of our wounded are still fighting on their own personal battlefields, dealing with what for many will be life-long wounds, and we will not leave them while they still need us. That is why we do what we do." ■

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Captain John J. McKenna IV

of Vietnam Era Veterans, Albany Mayor Kathy Sheehan, the generosity of the local building trades councils, and the financial assistance from many Capital Region donors, resulted in a beautiful and moving monument dedicated to all Gold Star Family members.



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