



Col. Brian R. Backus

— SERVICE BEFORE SELF



BY JENNA CAPUTO

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THE BACKUS FAMILY

Colonel Brian R. Backus grew up surrounded by extended family in Livonia, NY, a small town on the edge of the Finger Lakes. He enjoyed playing outdoor sports and spending time with his close-knit family. “My grandparents and my Uncle Jan were a cherished part of my childhood and played a large role in the man I am today,” says Brian. In high school, he was a three-sport athlete and participated in the arts/musical programs, performing in four musicals while there—*Bye Bye Birdie*, *Annie Get Your Gun*, *The Music Man*, and *How To Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*.

Brian loved life in a small town but knew he wanted to see the world. “As long as I can remember, I wanted to serve my country and was always drawn to a career of service. The military checked all those boxes,” he says. In high school, he planned on going to a military service academy, but due to a wrestling injury, was medically disqualified at the time. After recovering, he instead enlisted in the Navy and was selected for the Nuclear Power Program—one of their most challenging programs.

He spent the first 10 years of his career there, doing two tours of duty at the Kesselring Nuclear Power Training Unit as an Instructor. Stationed in Charleston, SC for submarine duty and operating out of the new base being built in Kings Bay, GA, Brian then transitioned to the NY Army National Guard as a Combat Medic



and then a Combat Medic Instructor for the Army Reserves. That experience led to becoming an Aeromedical Evacuation Technician in the NY Air National Guard at the 109th Airlift Wing here in Scotia. He then was commissioned as a 1st Lieutenant in the Medical Services Corps and rose through the ranks to retire as a Colonel and Commander of the 139th Aeromedical Evacuation Squadron in 2018.

Such an illustrious career led to many experiences, which included missions in Panama, Iraq, Afghanistan, Kuwait, Qatar, Djibouti, Germany, and Lebanon, among others. In 2010, he led the Aeromedical Evacuation efforts on the ground in Haiti after the earthquake, evacuating survivors for five weeks. In 2012, he led all patient movement for the entire US Central Command area of operations for eight months, moving Wounded Warriors to the next and better levels of care. These experiences are only some highlights of a career that had a world-wide impact.

While Brian loved making a difference on a global level, he also felt privileged to give back to his local community through his work in the 109th and 139th. "I will always consider the 109th to be my 'home' because of the lifelong military brothers and sisters I had the honor to serve with and for," he states. "It was an honor and privilege to serve as the USAF Commander 139th Airlift Wing the last five years of my military career, leading and preparing the future airmen/women in my care with my military. Each and every day, my goal was to lead by example and leave behind my leadership legacy around the importance of staying mission driven, providing the best care in the air, and 'service before self' before retiring in 2018. The bonds forged in the military withstand time and distance."



Brian continues to serve his community in various ways. Currently a Niskayuna Board of Education member, Brian strives for basing his decisions on what is best for *all* students while being cognizant of the fiscal impact on Niskayuna taxpayers. He also understands how these decisions affect those who take care of the students. "Something my wife and I passionately believe, as leaders in education, is that we must take care of the people who take care of the people who take care of our children," says Brian. "That being said, it's impossible as a leader to make everyone happy all the time. There is a funny saying my wife and I can relate to in our leadership positions: 'If you want to make everyone happy, go sell ice cream.'"

But that doesn't stop him from trying. Brian has been instrumental in the school reconfiguration process and is excited to



bring the five fifth grade classes together sooner. "We set out on the redesign journey with the lens of equity. We are determined to provide high quality education access and opportunity for all students and allow the fifth-grade students to form better relationships sooner on their journey, better preparing them for the transitions later in their academic path."

He's also proud of the current Capital Project to bring state-of-the-art instructional technology and updated learning environments, including project based and cooperative learning spaces, as well as an overhaul of the athletic facilities.

In 2021, Brian was elected to the Capital Region BOCES Board of Education for a three-year term. "I am enjoying this new challenge and feel like this role is making a greater impact on the teaching and learning initiatives for the 24 districts in the Capital Region," he says. "The Capital Region BOCES Capital Project is also underway, with a lot of innovative programs. Their career and technical programs and facilities are second to none in the nation!"

Brian also made an intentional choice to focus his servant leadership to a localized level, striving for impact on his family's community. In 2016, he was appointed to the Town of Niskayuna Planning Board. "The diversity on the town planning board is satisfying and impactful. It allowed me to experience firsthand how the Niskayuna Town functioned and served the residents of our town. Furthermore, I gained a better perspective on the needs and wants of our community by listening and learning as a planning board member. This experience allowed me to interact with residents and business owners and support the collective efficacy of the planning board when looking toward the future improvements while adhering to the Town's Comprehensive plan," he states. In 2018, Supervisor Syed invited Brian to become the Niskayuna's Confidential Secretary to the Supervisor. This too became a satisfying role for Brian, allowing him to be out interacting with the community he loves. "While the pandemic brought challenges with it for the town and those who live in Niskayuna, I also observed firsthand the dedication, collaboration, and service before self-work ethic that I had grown accustomed to in the military," he recalls.

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Brian is now married to Lynne Rutnik, the Deputy Superintendent in Schenectady City Schools. His two children, Meredith Wallace (37) is an assistant principal in Las Vegas, and Todd Backus (33) is the Literary Director of the Portland Maine Stage Company. His stepchildren, Owen and Aiylin Rutnik (17), are juniors at Niskayuna High School. He also has two granddaughters, Laken and Kinley Wallace, and two dogs—Finn, an 11-year-old Lhasa Apso, and Tinker, a rescue Silky Terrier. Family is still an important aspect of both Brian and Lynne's lives and they strive to be present in every moment. "We live busy lives. Our granddaughters and my daughter

live in Vegas. The twins are entering their last year in high school. What Lynne and I want most is more quality time with family, our dogs, friends, and neighbors, making more memories and making a difference where and when we can in our community. The pandemic has taught us many lessons, most importantly, the importance of family and the passage of time. The passage of time is sobering these days, something we will never get back. Enjoy every minute of the time you have together!"



The Backus/Rutnik family lives in a home on Grand Blvd. that is over 120 years old—originally the home of Christian Steenstrup, the inventor of the GE refrigerator. The twins have been involved in youth sports, moving from soccer to football, basketball, and lacrosse. Lynne has been selected for an International Scholar Program where she will travel to Berlin, Vienne, Prague, and Budapest to be a judge for international scholars teams working on problem-based solutions

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around the impact of wellness on educational systems. Brian will meet up with her in Budapest and then they will fulfill their dream of traveling to Ireland. After that, Lynne will pursue her doctorate in Educational Leadership and Policy.

Brian plans to continue his community work and is looking forward next year to conducting his fourth fundraising event for St. Baldrick's to raise money for pediatric cancer research. But along with his community work, Brian looks forward to more precious time with his family. When at home, they love to attend Niska Day and other community events, as well as heading to the racetrack, SPAC, sporting events, and supporting local businesses. They enjoy traveling to see their grandkids or to Aruba, a family favorite destination spot. But Glen Lake here in NY is their happy spot. Lynne has spent every summer of her life

there, and they continue to visit every year. Spending time with their family and friends out on the water or by a campfire at a slower life pace is a cherished escape. "It's as close to heaven as we get here on earth," he says.

Brian believes that world peace starts at home—"right at your kitchen table and with your neighbor... I spent 39 years in the military supporting and defending the US Constitution so that you can have the right to speak freely, whether I agree with what you have to say or not." After all his service in various capacities, Brian has observed so much in life, and has come to a conclusion—"I would encourage folks to stay curious versus judgmental. It's better for our mental and physical wellness." 🌿

