

# Fallen Hickory soldier part of NASCAR Memorial Day salute

- [By Emily Willis ewillis@hickoryrecord.com](mailto:ewillis@hickoryrecord.com) May 27, 2018



ROBERT C. REED/HICKORY DAILY RECORD: NASCAR driver Brad Keselowski talks to Eunice Eckard (center), mother of Gunnery Sgt. Chris Eckard and his brother Chad Eckard about honoring her son with his name on his race car during the Coca Cola 600 on Sunday.

ROBERT C. Reed

HICKORY — When NASCAR racers turn laps in the annual 600-mile race in Charlotte tonight, the name of a Hickory soldier will be prominently on display.

Driver Brad Keselowski's No. 2 Ford will have a banner sticker across the top of his windshield bearing the name of Gunnery Sgt. Chris Eckard.

Chris was killed in an explosion in Afghanistan in February 2010 during his fifth deployment. He is survived by his mother, Eunice; brother, Chad; wife, Ashley; and two sons, Steven and Avery.

“This is a chance for us to honor those who have made the ultimate sacrifice and their families,” Keselowski said. “I think it’s great that NASCAR has a program like this. Memorial Day goes a little less recognized than it should, and I’m honored to be part of it and part of this sport.”

Eunice says Chris' interest in the military first began when he was 8 or 9. Brother Chad can also attest to his brother's enthusiasm for the military. “When he was little, he would go out at night in camouflage and face paint on. He would come look in the living room window, and he would run back in the house and ask us if we saw him. To him it was a game, and he loved it,” Chad said.

More thoughts from Eckard's mother Eunice and brother Chad

**How would Chris have reacted to the recognition?**

Chad: "He probably wouldn't have wanted the recognition, but I think he would be proud of the things we have done to keep his memory alive. I hope that by keeping his memory alive, his children will see how great of a man he was."

**What is one thing you would want people to remember about Chris?**

Chad: "For me it would be the dedication he had for our country and being an outstanding soldier. It meant more to him than anything else in the world to be the best Marine he possibly could."

**What was your reaction to Chris' name being on Keselowski's car?**

Eunice: "I was ecstatic when we found out they wanted to use Chris' name on Brad's car — I just thought, 'Wow! What a moment.' Chris was a winner, and it would be the icing on the cake if Brad wins Sunday."

**What would you say to people celebrating Memorial Day?**

Eunice: "Have your celebrations, but remember why we have Memorial Day. Just take a few minutes out of your day to think about what Memorial Day is, and what it means to families who have lost loved ones who served. It just takes five minutes."

The brothers attended St. Stephens High School, ran track and spent a lot of their time together outside in the woods.

"I think we stayed in the woods more than the animals. We were just boys who played hard and fought hard," Chad said. "We were the best of friends."

Chris' interest in the military quickly rooted itself in his personality. Eunice finds it hard to believe there is someone out there more dedicated to America than her son.

"I didn't want him to keep re-enlisting, but he said, 'Mama, what better way to die than to die for your country?' He loved this country," Eunice said.

Now, Eunice keeps Chris' memory close to her heart by wearing a gold star charm on her necklace.

"If a family member shipped out, they put up a blue star for them. When Chris went in to his first deployment, we hung the blue star flag in my living room window. If they don't come home, you take the blue down and replace it with a gold star," Eunice said. "That is the meaning behind my necklace — I am a gold star mom."

The necklace is a constant for Eunice. So are memories of Chris.

"He is all over my house, in every room. We still talk about him and cry over him a lot. We miss him so much," Eunice said through tears.

Look for Keselowski's car and Eckard's name during the 59th annual Coca-Cola 600 at Charlotte Motor Speedway. All 40 Monster Energy NASCAR Cup Series cars will bear the name of a fallen service member on windshields during the race. The race begins at 6 p.m.