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Spirit Photo

Jason Blenker is honored with 'Patriot Award'

By Steve Ellingboe

Jason Blenker, president of Blenker Building Systems in Amherst, was honored last month with the Patriot Award for Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve. The award was presented by Air Force Colonel Marci Ledlow as about 40 of Blenker's employees looked on.

The award acknowledges employers for their outstanding support of employees who are serving in the National Guard or Reserves. Blenker was nominated for the award by Sgt. Eric Chojnacki, a Blenker employee and National Guard member who was deployed for his second tour of Iraq last February.

In his letter nominating Blenker, Chojnacki wrote:

"Jason is an outstanding employer and cares a great deal about my military service. Anytime I have a drill, there are never any questions asked; he has the trust that I am doing the right thing. I am currently deployed to Iraq, and before I left, he awarded me with a mini-vacation to a beautiful hotel in the Wisconsin Dells and gave me a thank-you card for my service. When I told him I needed time prior to my deployment to prepare myself, he hands-down accepted my request. We keep

communication throughout my deployment, and after our company's monthly meetings, he sends me a brief on the topics discussed so that I can stay in the information loop. Jason also agreed to allow me to continue my education in the apprenticeship program while I am deployed so that I do not have to add an additional year of schooling upon my return. Jason has 100 percent approval when it comes to me and my military career, and he encourages me to continue to be a better soldier."

Col. Ledlow presented Blenker with a plaque acknowledging the Patriot Award.

"This is an extremely rare thing for an employer," she said, "especially these days with so many repeat deployments. A lot of reservists and guard members actually try to hide the fact that they are in the guard or reserve on their resumes, because some employers are discriminating against them when it comes to hiring. So this is a great honor that Eric has recognized Jason and nominated him to receive this award."

Ledlow added that all Blenker employees should share in the honor.

"It's not just Jason who is receiving this award, even though his name is on the plaque," she told the group. "It's all of you - Eric's fellow employees - because whenever one

of you leaves, the rest have to step up and fill the gap during his absence. So it's really Eric's way of saying thank you to all of you for everything you do for him."

Col. Ledlow, who is the Central Wisconsin representative of an organization known as Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve (ESGR), said she presents only about three or four Patriot Awards a year, and it is always a special honor.

The colonel's husband, Vincent Ledlow, is also a member of the organization and accompanied the colonel in making the presentation. He said ESGR was established to help both employers and employees understand and observe the laws regarding the rights of Reservists and National Guard members.

"What it really means is that when we've got folks, as this company does, serving overseas and defending our freedoms, that they have rights to come back to work when they return, and that employers also have rights to be notified of their intent to come back to work," he said. "The guard and reserve now represent at least half of our country's national defense capability, so it is really a pleasure for us to travel around the state and represent this organization."



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