No strings attached

By Chaplain Allen Vaughan

Since this is a season of gift-giving, I hope that you have had the pleasure of being on both the giving and receiving end of gift exchanges.

Perhaps, in your home you have a tradition of exchanging gifts with family members. But, when was the last time you gave a gift to someone without expecting anything in return? Before you answer this question, I want you to think carefully and try to recall a time when you truly gave a gift without expecting anything at all in return.

Maybe you brought a plate of cookies or fudge to your coworkers, just to say "thank you" for all that they do. Perhaps you offered your time and talents volunteering for an organization that serves the poor and underprivileged—people who couldn't possibly pay you back or return the favor. Or, maybe you sent a Christmas card to that one relative who never writes back or bothers to call. But out of the kindness of your heart, you sent a card anyway without expecting to get a card in return.

However, if you and I were to examine the motives behind our gift-giving, we might be surprised to discover that, in fact, most of our giving is done with conditions and expectations attached to the gift.

In other words, there are nearly always strings attached to our giving and those strings aren't so easy to identify.

When we give a gift, even though we may not expect to get anything in return, one "string" which could be attached to our gift is that we might expect the receiver to be thankful—that he or she might show some appreciation for the gift.

How might you or I feel if we were to discover that what we gave was "re-gifted" at no expense to the person who originally received it? If that would make you angry, then you might have a "string" attached to the gift.

There is one string which is nearly always attached to every gift we give, and it is the expectation that, when we give a gift, our giving will make us "feel good." That's a tough string to see sometimes, and an even tougher string to detach from our gifts. So, it is safe to say that our gift giving might not be as selfless as we would like to think.

One of the greatest gifts we can give to another person is love. And, like any other gift, our love is often given with numerous strings attached. Human love is full of expectations and conditions. Most of the time, we decide to give our love based upon what we feel or what we desire.

We also give our love based upon how the other person responds. The better the response, the more love we give. Likewise, we tend to give our love less willingly if the other person doesn't respond or return our love in a manner that we expect.

Human love tends to burn up or burn out, and needs to be fueled by the other person in order to keep the fire going. If we say things like, "I need you," or "I can't live without you," then our level of desperation rises if we think we are not getting what we need from the person to whom we are giving our love.

By stark contrast, God's love is the exact opposite of human love. God's love is unconditional. It is not given to us based upon our acceptance or rejection of his love.

God's love is unilateral. It is not fueled by how much love we give or withhold in return in order to be kept alive.

God's love is liberating. Out of love, God promises that he will provide everything that we need. Because of this promise, we no longer have to live in fear, wondering if we will get everything we want. This is liberating!

And finally, God's love is other-centered. God specifically and directly aims his love at us and for our deliverance, our salvation, and our freedom. The gift that God gives us, which is celebrated during this season, is an unconditional, unilateral, liberating, selfless, and sacrificial gift of love.

In the New Testament book of Acts (20:35), we hear that, "It is more blessed to give than receive." This Christmas, I urge you to be a blessing to others by getting into the practice of giving gifts—and giving love—with no strings attached!

NCIS Crime Reduction Program helps fight sexual assault

By MC3 Charles Oki,
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QUANTICO, Va. – The Naval Criminal Investigative Service (NCIS) Crime Reduction Program (CRP) has begun its first quarter campaign of fiscal year (FY) 2012 with a focus on sexual assault prevention.

The CRP was created in 2008 to help military members and their family members prevent crimes they may face at home and abroad. NCIS uses command training briefs and community outreach events to help spread the message of how to avoid becoming a victim.

In fiscal year 2010, more than 3,000 cases of sexual assault were reported among all of the branches of the military. Department of Defense Directive (DoDD) 6495.01 defines sexual assault as intentional sexual contact, characterized by use of force, threats, intimidation, abuse of authority, or a situation in which the victim does not or cannot consent.

Collaborating with the Office of the Judge Advocate General, Family Advocacy Program, Chaplain Corps, public affairs elements and other Department of the Navy assets, NCIS is engaging with its Sailors and Marines to help stop potential incidents.

"Education is a big part of sexual assault prevention," said NCIS Special Agent Bob Vance, a special agent desk officer for family and sexual violence. "Unfortunately, one of the biggest things we're fighting is properly educating ourselves as a society. Something we face is that many people don't view sexual assault as a very serious offense, and, because of that, it occurs more often. If we don't educate the public, sexual assault will continue to occur."

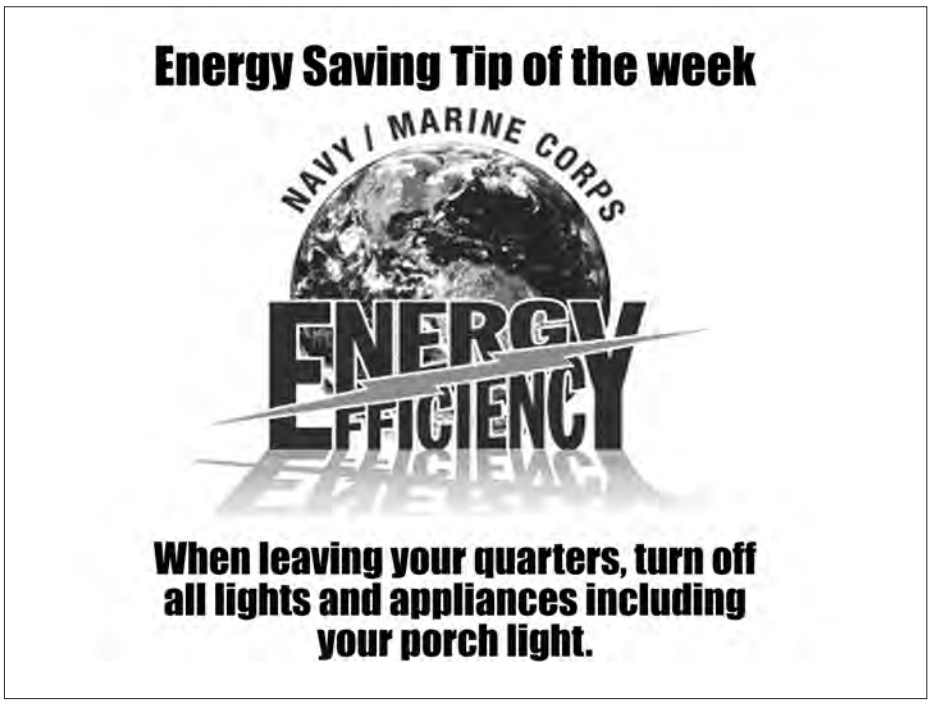
According to statistics from FY2010, military members ranked E-1 to E-4 and those ranging from 20 to 24 years of age have the highest risk of becoming a victim of sexual assault. A major factor in most cases is the consumption of alcohol by the victim, suspect or both, along with the suspect being a friend or a coworker.

"Bystander intervention is one of the most effective ways of diffusing a possible situation," said NCIS Special Agent Carrie Nelson, the special agent desk officer for the CRP. "Doing something as simple as speaking up when someone is making unwanted advances on a friend or stranger might save them from becoming a victim. A lot of incidents could have been prevented if people knew what kind of warning signs to look for and how to intervene."

Other examples of bystander intervention include making up an excuse to get someone away from a risky situation, telling a bartender or party host that someone has had too much to drink, trying to keep someone from going to an isolated location, and maybe even calling the police.

The Department of Defense has two sexual assault reporting policies: restricted and unrestricted. Under restricted reporting, a victim may notify a victim advocate, sexual assault response coordinator (SARC), healthcare provider, or chaplain. Law enforcement is not notified and an investigation will not be initiated. Victims will be provided a victim advocate and will sign a statement of reporting preference.

With unrestricted reporting, an official law enforcement investigation is initiated, victims will be provided a victim advocate, a SARC will monitor their care, and victims will be updated monthly on the status of the investigation. Once a victim decides on unrestricted reporting, they can't go back and change it to restricted reporting.

Victims of sexual assault or witnesses with information about a sexual assault can call the NCIS Hotline at 1-877-579-3648 or the National Sexual Assault Hotline at 1-800-656-HOPE (4673), which will connect the caller to a local rape crisis center. Tips may also be submitted online with the NCIS confidential web tip information system at the following link: https://www.tipsubmit.com/webtipsNAV.aspx?AgencyID=840. Personnel stationed overseas may utilize the NCIS hotline or the online web tip system.

NCIS is a federal law enforcement agency that protects and defends the U.S. Department of the Navy against terrorism and foreign intelligence threats, investigates major criminal offenses and provides law enforcement and security services to the Navy and Marine Corps on a worldwide basis. The agency is comprised of approximately 2,400 total employees, including 1,200 civilian special agents, in more than 150 locations around the world.