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Jamaica Plain post office to be renamed Sunday in hero's honor

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By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

Twenty-seven years ago today, Victoria Foley's first son was born.

She fondly remembers Alexander Scott Arredondo as her "little angle" who grew into her "handsome little man."

And, this weekend, his country will remember him permanently as a hero.



Lcpl. Alexander Arredondo

Seven years ago this month, the Lance Corporal sacrificed his life defending his fellow Marines during a battle in Iraq. On Sunday afternoon, the post office in Jamaica Plain's center near where Arredondo grew up will be named in his honor.

"I knew he would make me proud. I knew he would," Foley, 46, said by phone Friday from her Norwood home, where she and relatives were making cupcakes and preparing a small birthday celebration to remember her son.

In what would be his last mission, Arredondo led fellow Marines to

clear and secure a two-story building in Najaf, Iraq. Under intense, close-range enemy fire, as bullets from small arms, machine guns and RPGs whizzed by, grenades exploded and debris flew, the 20-year-old fearlessly and swiftly led his platoon to complete the mission's objective, according to a statement by his commander.

In the midst of battle, Arredondo was "personally clearing rooms and assuming the greatest risk ... never slowing down and never showing any fear," said a written account by the lieutenant general.

During his three weeks fighting in Najaf while on his second tour of duty, Arredondo displayed "the highest levels of selflessness and courage," his

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commander said, and what would be his final moments were a testament to his bravery.

After the building was secured, the young man set his fellow soldiers up in a strategic defensive position preparing to reengage the enemy. As he walked to each squad member to check on their security and well-being, an enemy sniper fatally shot Arredondo on August 25, 2004, "giving his life fighting for freedom and defending his fellow Marines," the commander wrote.

"That was Alex," his mom said.

The account of Arredondo's bravery was read aloud earlier this year before Congress, which late last year passed a bill, authored by US Representative Michael E. Capuano and co-sponsored by nine other legislators, to name the federal post office at 655 Centre St. "Lance Corporal Alexander Scott Arredondo, United States Marine Corps Post Office Building."

That legislation was signed by President Obama in early January. Arredondo also earned the Navy and Marine Corps Commendation Medal with combat "V" and the Purple Heart for his actions during that battle.

"It's quite an honor. To have this dedication, it means a lot to my family. "I'm so proud of him. It was so commendable, courageous," said Foley. "I'm at a loss for words right now. I don't even know how to describe it."

United States Postal Service spokesman Dennis P. Tarmey said a plaque honoring Arredondo will be installed inside the Centre Street post office.

Dedicating post offices in an individual's honor appears to be a growing trend, he said, listing five others that have been renamed in Massachusetts, including three -- in Fall River, Shrewsbury and Brockton -- within the last two years, as well as a proposal to name a Woburn post office in honor of a fallen city police officer, John Maguire.

Arredondo was born in Randolph and raised for a decade in a home on South Street in Jamaica Plain, a neighborhood where Foley has four generations of family ties.

Foley remembered bringing her young son around the neighborhood. They would visit relatives and go to nearby parks and Jamaica Pond together. He went to daycare in Jamaica Plain and attended youth activities at the firehouse. The neighborhood is also where loved ones paid their final respects to him when his wake and funeral were held at St. Thomas Aquinas Parish.

"When I go back, I remember those certain things," said Foley. "It brings back a lot of different memories."

At least five days a week, the mother-son duo would pass by, and occasionally stop in, the Centre Street post office, a 10-minute walk from their home.

It was at that post office that Foley's grandmother had read a telegram "that changed her life." The message informed her that her first-born son William Tompkins, Arredondo's great uncle, had died while serving in the Korean War, Foley remembered.

She added that she's both "excited" for her son to be remembered, but also "nervous" because she "can't believe it's been seven years."

"This is the first time in seven years I'm not in a fog," said Foley. "It's taken quite a toll on me."

Seven years of painful, quiet grief

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Foley said before he joined the military, her son had lived all of his 17 years and 11 months primarily with her, his biological mother. But since Arredondo's passing, Foley has rarely been contacted by media and others about his heroic death and memorials that have been held since.

Instead, questions about the Marine's life and passing have often been directed to his biological father, Carlos Arredondo, and his stepmother, Mélida Arredondo, of Roslindale.

Carlos Arredondo made national headlines for his immediate reaction upon learning his son had [died on Aug. 25](#), Carlos' 44th birthday.

On the driveway of what was his home at the time in Florida, the father picked up a sledgehammer and smashed the windshield of the parked vehicle that had delivered the word of his son's death. He poured gasoline on the van and himself and lit a torch which caused an explosion and serious burns on over 20 percent of his body before the Marines rescued him.

After nearly a year of recovery, Arredondo began travelling the country with Mélida to raise awareness "about the cost of war" as well as about rules, laws and other issues with military service they feel are unjust either for soldiers or their families. They've done public speaking at protests, rallies, memorials and before politicians in the nation's capital.

On rare occasions when a reporter has contacted the Marine's biological mother for a story about her son, she said they often questioned her identity as his mother because of her different last name.

After [Globe](#) and [Boston.com](#) stories earlier this year about the post office renaming, two of Foley's relatives e-mailed Boston.com asking that Arredondo's biological mother not continue to be ignored in future coverage about her son.

Foley said she often did not actively reach out to media and others herself because not only was she typically unaware that a story about her son was being prepared, but also because, "For the last seven years, I've been grieving. And, it's hard to grieve when it keeps getting brought up."

She credited the Marine's father and step mother for their outreach efforts – including leading the effort to have the JP post office named after to him and establishing a scholarship 5 years ago at Blue Hill Regional Technical high school in Canton, where Alexander graduated from in 2002 before joining the Marines.

Foley said she's struggled to cope with his abrupt passing.

"I can't ask him if I did a good job as a mother," she said of her son, who she last saw on Mother's Day in 2004, when he gave her a framed picture, and who she last spoke with by phone 24 hours before his death.

"Every time he'd call, he'd take my breath away. Every time I heard from him, I knew it was a blessing," she said.

She remembered that final phone conversation. Arredondo said he was "fatigued, tired," and that his mom, "wouldn't believe the craziness going on," around where he was fighting in Iraq.

"The thing I remember telling him was, 'keep your head down, remember I love you and say your prayers,'" Foley recalled.

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One day later, Marine officials sat Foley down at a table inside her home. She knew why they were there before they told her.

Still, "It's the worst feeling ever to actually hear those words," she said. "I had a hard time keeping myself together."

She said she'd told her son for years that he was a leader. He never believed her until he joined the military, when his mother said her son told her, "It scares me a little bit that people really look up to me, mom."

"We had been through a lot of tough times," said Foley, who at times struggled as a single mother to make ends meet. "There was a lot of hardship for us."

She remembers telling him in his youth and teen years that, "When you find good people, you hang onto them. You give your own shirt off your back for them."

"He made some good friends out there," in Iraq, his mother said. "He met some good comrades, and he protected them."

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