

Homefront Santa makes deliveries to military families

San Juan Capistrano-based group matches donors with deserving families.

BY SEAN EMERY
CAPISTRANO VALLEY NEWS

SAN JUAN CAPISTRANO— It's a sunny San Juan Saturday as a group of six volunteers gather in Mamie Maywhort's garage preparing to play Santa Claus for half a dozen military families.

The group is setting up for their first round of deliveries for the San Juan-based Homefront America's Homefront Santa program, which, over the weeks leading up to Christmas, will reach out to 90 military families.

Maywhort and Art Hasselbrink, a fellow Homefront board member, are pleased with the initial stages of the program, during which time sponsors from "the desert to the sea" — or, more specifically, from Northern California to San Diego and from Victorville to Newport Beach — agreed to adopt military families. Now, the group is preparing to see first hand the results of its efforts.

For the White family — Larry, Margie and their daughter Marla — volunteering for the Homefront Santa hits particularly close to home. Marla's fiancé, Chris Kuehne, is stationed in Iraq, and is scheduled to come home on Dec. 23.

"That would be the best Christmas gift," Marla says.

The Whites first learned about Homefront America during a San Juan Capistrano concert in the park, and gave its leaders a call about a week before Saturday's gift deliveries to see how they could help.

The Whites had already reached out to Kuehne's unit, working with his mother in Virginia, friends and family to collect more than 50 stockings and Christmas tree decorations to send to the troops.

The volunteers begin their trip in San Clemente, dropping off presents for the first two families on Homefront Santa's list.

As they unload bags of presents onto the family's respective doorsteps, their young children eagerly eye the gifts. Three-year-old Fritz Slayer III helps open the gifts bags and attempts to open the gifts themselves before being gently warned "you've got to be patient" by his father. The family thanks the volunteers for their efforts to bring Christmas joy.

"Being here for a couple years, we would expect it to slope off, but the community has been great straight through," Slayer says. "It really does make a difference whether the community sees it or not."

As the volunteers make their drive down to Camp Pendleton to deliver gifts to the remaining five families on Saturday's list, Marla speaks of the challenge of having a loved one serving overseas.

"It's tough having to give up that person, but you have to look at the big picture, not the here and now. He loves what he does and he loves America," Marla says. "He says, 'I've got my guys over there, and we are serving our purpose.'"

At the group's first stop at Camp Pendleton, Ivette Lopez tearfully thanks the Homefront volunteers, explaining that this will be the first Christmas during her husband's 10-year military tenure in which he will not be home for the holiday.

"Here we are in a new place, and we don't know anybody," Lopez says.

"Well, you know us now," Maywhort replies.

As the volunteers navigate Camp Pendleton's base housing tracts in search of the remaining family's homes, Larry points out the difficulty of having to choose whom to deliver gifts to.

"You drive through these streets and feel like helping everyone," he says.

While the Homefront volunteers unload presents at the Acuna family residence, Joe Acuna speaks of the impact of family outreach on troops stationed overseas.

"There is nothing more important than to understand that their family is being taken care of back home," he says.

Saturday's deliveries are only the beginning, Maywhort says, with 10 more deliveries scheduled for next weekend. The group will reach out to 50 more families through the Toys for Tots program.

Many of the 45 individual sponsors taking part in the Homefront effort have praised the personal touch the program provides, Maywhort says.

"I got e-mails about how wonderful the program was, how meaningful it was to connect with the families," she says. "We had no idea that we would touch people that way."

For more information about Homefront America call 949-248-9468 or visit www.homefrontamerica.org.

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