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Disney on Ice: 'Magic' makes memories for military families

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For a couple of hours on Wednesday night, several thousand military children might be able to get their minds off having parents away at war.

Operation Celebrate Children will offer free dinner and "Disney on Ice: 100 Years of Magic" at the Crown Coliseum for ages 3 to 13.

The private show is for children with parents who are deployed. They will receive a gift bag. Children of a parent who died in combat also have been invited and will be seated in a special area, said Tommy Bolton, an organizer.

Public shows are from Thursday through Nov. 1. This year, almost half of Fort Bragg's soldiers have deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan. Many are fathers and mothers.

The show is intended to give special memories to the children who are missing their parents and worrying about them.

"Left, right, front, back, everybody is just like you," Bolton said. He is a civilian aide to the secretary of the Army and chairman of the Bragg Special Activities Committee.

The coliseum has seating for 6,600. The show has 65 characters from Mickey Mouse to Goofy and Donald Duck.

Mickey Mouse will come out on the ice before the show and talk to the children, thank them and explain why they are there, Bolton said.

Organizers said they gave tickets the senior noncommissioned officers of commands at Fort Bragg and Pope Air Force Base to distribute to children whose parents are deployed.

Seven local organizations that support the military have joined forces for the project.

"The excitement about this comes from the fact that we have as military-related organizations never worked together to put something like this on specifically for deployed soldiers," said Bobby Suggs, the state president of the Association of the U.S. Army, one of the organizations participating. "That's where the real payback comes. We can now do something for those kids whose parents have been separated from them in harm's way for quite some time, on more than one occasion, too."

Other participating organizations include the Association of Special Operations Professionals, the Special Forces Association, the Armed Forces Communications and Electronics Association, Operation Home Front and the Air Force Association.

"We've never gotten together and said, 'We as a group now are going to sponsor something for the children while their parents are fighting for us,' " Suggs said.

The organizers are not even asking for contributions. Corporate sponsors include Progress Energy, Systel Office Automation, General Dynamics-Itronix, Taco Bell, The Fayetteville Observer, Fayetteville Area Convention and Visitors Bureau, and Kodak.

"I asked the gentlemen with whom we have been negotiating this event, 'Have you ever heard of this being done before?' " Bolton said. "The answer was no. This was the first time this kind of thing has ever been done anywhere."