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Benefit aims to give soldiers touch of home

BY LEE BLOOMQUIST
NEWS TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

VIRGINIA - Nearly every day, Kelly Erickson tries to provide her husband, Keith, with a reminder of home.

"Even for Keith, who's in a very safe place, we have regular e-mail contact about every other day," said Kelly Erickson of Mountain Iron. Her husband is stationed with the Minnesota Air National Guard 148th Fighter Wing in Qatar.

"We sent him a package a week of local newspapers, his magazines, and, in the last package we sent him some pistachios and jerky. He said, 'Oh, that was great.' They're lonesome, and any touch of home that reminds them of the states means so much to them."

Providing that touch of home is the goal of a benefit planned Saturday for soldiers from Northeastern Minnesota, the state and the nation at Olcott Park in Virginia and at the Boondocks Bar and Restaurant in Forbes.


The Anysoldier.com benefit, named for a Web site that connects citizens with soldiers who may not receive any mail or packages from home, plans to gather enough items to send care packages to 500 soldiers stationed in Iraq, Afghanistan, Qatar or any foreign country where U.S. military are serving.

The benefit also hopes to raise about \$4,000 in cash to cover the cost of mailing the care packages abroad.

"We're doing this to boost their morale," said Pam Pilney, administrative assistant at the Laurentian Chamber of Commerce in Virginia, coordinator of the event. "It's not a political event and it's nothing about the war. It's just about the men and women who are missing home."

A Family Day at Olcott Park is from noon to 4 p.m.

Raffles, games and prizes, letter writing, a silent auction of children's items, food and beverage sales, and a carnival are



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part of the family event.

Beanbag and horseshoe tournaments, music, souvenir sales, food and beverage sales, and a silent auction for adults is from 4 p.m. to 1 a.m. at Boondocks, about 12 miles south of Virginia on Highway 7.

Admission to both events is free.

"We see this as a community event," said Pilney. "We're hoping to see people from Duluth, Grand Rapids, the Iron Range and all the way to the North Shore."

Pilney is asking businesses to help sponsor the event and the public to contribute items for care packages.

She's also hoping for support from across the region.

"Our first goal is to reach the boys from our area," said Pilney. "Our second goal is to reach boys and girls from Minnesota. If we have this amazing surplus, we will utilize it by giving the packages to Anysoldier.com.

On Anysoldier.com, some soldiers write letters describing their feelings and longing for home.

"From some of the stuff you read in their letters, you can see they are having a tough time because of some of the situations they are put into," Pilney said, whose daughter, Ashley, is in the Navy. "For a first event, this benefit is turning into a huge event."

To help, care package items should be dropped off at the Laurentian Chamber of Commerce or Blockbuster Video in Mountain Iron. Care-package items can also be brought Saturday to Olcott Park or Boondocks Bar and Restaurant.

Up-to-date mailing addresses for area soldiers, sponsorship, or further questions should be called into Pilney at (218) 741-2717.

The goal is to have the packages into soldiers' hands between Thanksgiving and Christmas.

"Some of these are boys and girls who don't have any family and who aren't able to receive things from home," said Pilney. "We're just excited to be able to help the soldiers."

LEE BLOOMQUIST covers the Iron Range. He can be reached weekdays at (800)368-2506, (218)744-2354 or by e-mail at leebloom@cpinternet.com.

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