



NEWS FROM:

**NEW JERSEY
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Holiday Express Hosts Party for National Guard Families

ASBURY PARK -- More than 500 family members of deployed New Jersey National Guard soldiers and airmen enjoyed an afternoon of food, games and music on Sunday at a party thrown in their honor by Holiday Express.

It was the first time the 16-year-old charity feted military families at one of its trademark holiday parties, which are headlined by a band of more than 80 professional musicians.

Tim McLoone, the Holiday Express founder and bandleader, said it was long overdue. "We've been wanting to do something for the military for the longest time," McLoone said. "But when we heard about the big Guard deployment, we knew this was the time to do it."

The big deployment is that of the 50th Infantry Brigade Combat Team and its 2,900 soldiers to Iraq. McLoone said he recognized that the state's largest wartime mobilization since World War II leaves thousands of families without a key member this holiday season. The brigade, which is responsible for detainee operations in Iraq, is scheduled to re-deploy to New Jersey late in late Spring 2009.

"The sheer numbers on this deployment meant we really needed to do something," said McLoone, who served in the 253rd Transportation Company during the 1970s. "In my time, it would have been unthinkable to see so many soldiers sent to war, but things are different now."

The party at Convention Hall on Asbury Park's boardwalk kicked off at noon with McLoone announcing that he had made a \$5,000 donation to the State Family Readiness Council, a non-profit organization that provides financial assistance to deployed troops and their families.

While families enjoyed food donated by Jersey Mike's Subs, New Jersey 101.5 radio began a live broadcast from Convention Hall.

Gov. Jon Corzine arrived and thanked the families for their sacrifice.

"You are helping everybody in New Jersey," he said. "We are proud of you."

After everyone had eaten, the Holiday Express band began to play and the Grinch, Frosty the Snowman, and Santa Claus made guest appearances on a dance floor crowded with the families.

As the party wound down, McLoone announced the names of the three winners of the door prizes donated by Holiday Express – Wii video games.

After the prizes were awarded, 4-year-old Solomon Hammond and his 7-year-old brother, Ason Hammond, beamed. Their father, Sgt. Boudra Hammond is serving in Iraq with Alpha Company, 3-112th Fires Battalion, based in Morristown.

As her sons talked excitedly about their new toy, their mother, Stephanie Hammond, said the holiday party was a nice break from the rigors of being a single parent while her husband is deployed.

"My boys had so much fun today," she said. "We just had a great time."

***For more information about the State Family Readiness Council, contact Marie Durling at 609-658-2637.
Donations may be mailed to the NJNG State Family Readiness Council, P.O. Box 5692, Trenton, NJ 08638***