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by Airman 1st Class Joe McFadden
1st Special Operations Wing Public Affairs

12/9/2009 - **HURLBURT FIELD, Fla.** -- With this year designated as the Year of the Air Force Family, many people understand that deployments are a way of life. The separation between family members can last for months, and some may deploy many times within a year.

But how do families adjust to these changes, especially during the holiday season, a time where people traditionally gather for dinner and share presents with their loved ones?

One of the resources that spouses and children have during these times is the Hearts Apart morale program, which organized an annual holiday party in the chapel at Hurlburt Field Dec. 4.

"We know the sacrifices they make, and we don't want them to be alone for the holidays," said Kelly Childs, a community readiness consultant at the Airman & Family Readiness Center. "Here you can get together, share and meet someone in the same situation that you are in."

Mrs. Childs said that children are the big focus during the holiday season. Many of them are directly affected by deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan and experience a parent deploy for several months at a time.

"We talk to parents about coping with holiday stressors like a spouse being deployed. People can feel socially isolated, and we want to make sure that everyone is taken care of and not feel different," she said.

Mrs. Childs coordinated with different base groups like the chapel and library to carry out this year's party. Throughout the year, the program sponsored a series of monthly gatherings for spouses and children of deployed members.

"Our goal is to find out about the people's needs and do things for each one of them," Mrs. Childs said.

With more than 150 people in attendance, this year's party was so large that organizers moved it from Airman & Family Readiness Center to the chapel. Families were treated to a potluck banquet complete with roast ham and turkey, and staples like green bean casseroles, sweet potatoes and homemade pies.

After the meal, children had the opportunity to get their picture taken with Santa Claus and received gifts purchased with donations to the program. Library staff also offered an arts and craft station where children made ornaments and greeting cards with construction paper and glitter.

Scott Hepworth, a civilian working at the Eglin golf course, took his two teenage children to the event. His wife, Tech. Sgt. Ramona Hepworth, 823rd RED HORSE Squadron, is deployed and will not be home for the holidays. This week's event was Mr. Hepworth's first holiday party with the program.

"In most cases like this, the spouses are predominantly female, but it's nice to have people here who know what you've been through with the kids being busy in school and parents being busy with the kids," he said.

Mercedes Garcia is the wife of Staff Sgt. Matthew Chandler, also from the 823rd RED HORSE Squadron, and mother of three children. She said she enjoyed taking her daughters to the monthly events.

"My kids got a kick out of going to the movie theater for food and a movie last month. I give this program an A+," she said.

Her eldest daughter, 12-year-old Patricia, said her favorite part was the food.

"It was nice of all the people to get together and share," she said as she generously applied whipped cream to a slice of pumpkin pie.

The program not only supports Air Force families, but any Department of Defense card holder in the area with members serving on remote or deployed tours.

Ursula Chambers' husband, Army Sgt. 1st Class Harry Chambers, is currently serving a remote tour in Korea. A regular at the monthly functions, she brought her two sons to the party, who looked forward to visiting with Santa Claus after they finished their meal.

"Whenever it's time for another event, it's a good marker that another month has gone by and my husband will soon be home," she said.

According to 1st Special Operations Force Support Squadron Web site, Hearts Apart provides information and resources to assist members and their families to be as prepared as possible for deployments, remote assignments and for natural disasters.

Photos

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Santa Claus visits with a child during the Hearts Apart annual holiday party Dec. 4 at the Hurlburt Field Chapel. Throughout the year, the program sponsors a series of monthly gatherings for spouses and children of deployed members. (Air Force photo by Senior Airman Matthew Loken)

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