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## **UWP and Grant County 4-H accept award for involvement with Operation: Military Kids**

PLATTEVILLE – During the Wisconsin National Guard’s Family Weekend, March 9 to 11, in Green Bay, the University of Wisconsin-Platteville and Grant County 4-H accepted the Community Commitment Award from the Wisconsin National Guard for their joint efforts in supporting Operation: Military Kids (OMK) this year and in the past. Sue Curtis, director of UWP’s Community University Partnership, trained this year’s volunteer counselors and accompanied them to the event, where they supervised children whose parents have been, are currently or will be deployed for military service. UWP students and local 4-H members volunteered as counselors for the children while their parents participated in workshops that help them adjust to life after deployment.

According to Curtis, the group’s main goals were to provide supervision and fun, to be a support network and to help the children get to know and support each other. She said that because their parents are civilians most of the time, the children may have a hard time coping with the temporary loss of a parent and may be worried about the welfare of the deployed parent. The counselors spent time talking with the kids one-on-one and in groups, developing coping skills. UWP students wrote letters to the children to thank them for sacrificing a parent during wartime.

“One of the things I’ve learned in talking with families is that saying goodbye is not the hardest part. It is the day-to-day wondering if the parent is alright. If we don’t provide some positive opportunities for military families now, there could be some long-term negative consequences,” said Curtis.

Counselors for the event included Mike Mani, a UWP student from Mt. Horeb; Jessica Knox, a UWP student from Green Bay; Samantha Jackson, a Fennimore High School student; her mother, Connie Jackson, of Fennimore; along with Sophie Lee, a South Korean foreign exchange student; Ashley and Nicole Cray, Potosi High School students; Patricia Block, of Platteville; Stephen Dutelle, a UWP graduate student from Platteville; and Alyssa Adrian and Taylor Bausch, Cassville High School students.

“I will never forget walking in there Friday night and seeing a kid that was there last year. I gave him a hug and asked how he’s been. We talked during the weekend, and when he left I made sure to give him a hug and told him that I would hopefully see him next year. All the kids were great. This weekend is always tough for them; many of them don’t like leaving their parents. But after the first day, we had several kids looking forward to coming and many didn’t even remember to say good-bye to their parents because they were so excited,” said Nicole Cray.

“I will never forget the look on the kids’ faces when we went bowling with them, and they knocked down a pin. It didn’t matter how many they hit; they were so happy with themselves. It was definitely worthwhile because it let everyone come together and support each other through many different games and activities. Even though I was pretty tired at the end of each day, I didn’t care. I would have done this whole event for another few days if needed. As long as they were happy, so was I,” said Ashley Cray.

“After the event, I was glad I was able to be a part of it once again. The kids were a blast and were fun to be with. They cooperated with us well and were always willing to try a new game or activity. It was definitely worthwhile and I would do it again in a heartbeat,” said Samantha Jackson.

“This is the second year I’ve chaperoned the Grant County 4-H kids to OMK. Every day we see news about the war and if we don’t have a family member directly involved, we might go about our daily routines without much thought. We run here and there to our children’s activities and feel bad if we miss an event. Sometimes we wish that we didn’t have so much running to do for our

kids. Children with a deployed parent know their parent won't be there. They just hope that the parent returns home safely. We take for granted the fears these families are dealing with on a daily basis. Thank God there are people willing to give up their time, and sometimes lives, that they can never make up. It could be the birth of a child, graduation or anything that only comes around once in a lifetime. We will never completely know what sacrifices military families make to keep us safe and living in a free country, but it's events like OMK that help to give us a better appreciation for what we have," Connie Jackson said.

"Having been a military kid during the first Gulf War, this event reinforced the reality of the unknown during wartime. For these kids, there is a constant fear that hangs over them. When your loved one is overseas, you struggle on a daily basis to keep hope alive, and these kids are a perfect example of that resilience," said Dutelle.

Anyone wanting more information about OMK may contact Curtis at (608) 342-1308 or [curtissu@uwplatt.edu](mailto:curtissu@uwplatt.edu).

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