

For Our Heroes in Uniform

Pay It Forward

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Little Patriots Embraced distributes specially designed teddy bears to kids whose parents have been deployed. Photo courtesy of LPE

The men and women who serve our country put their lives on the line to keep us free. That's what makes the work of three St. Louis-based organizations so important: They express the thanks of a grateful nation by supporting troops and their families.

Little Patriots Embraced (LPE)

Society is changing at a rapid pace, but one thing remains constant: Children need their parents. "Military deployment creates incredible stress for kids, who are dealing not only with the pain of separation or relocation, but also the fear that Mom or Dad might not come back," says co-founder and executive director Carol Watanabe. "Our mission is to reduce stress for military families, with a special focus on kids."

The St. Louis-based organization's programs include financial assistance as well as family deployment packages containing receiving blankets or infants, CDs of soothing music, teddy bears with backpacks that hold photos of Mom or Dad,

journals for older kids, and other stress-reducing items. "A recent program, Project Bear Essentials, helps parents and teachers cope with young kids who have emotional issues due to deployment of a parent," Watanabe explains. "And next year, we hope to send specially trained volunteers to military base libraries to read to kids and help them better understand their role in deployment."

LPE has served at least 10,000 families nationwide since 2004, Watanabe adds. Two annual programs, a toy drive in partnership with Toys for Tots, and Adopt-a-Military Family, are now underway. Sadly, but not surprisingly, donations have fallen since the economy slowed down: "We're supposed to send out 3,000 deployment packages in December, but we can't afford shipping costs," Watanabe admits. "We've got 6,000 kids on our waiting list. We need money and volunteers!" A Dec. 10 concert at Florissant Civic Center Theatre, featuring a tribute to the music of Elvis Presley and Buddy Holly, benefits LPE holiday programs for military families.