

G & M Plumbing employee Winston Williams keeps an eye on the stopped traffic as a fire main is installed over North Lee Street Tuesday for the bowling alley under renovations into a Mr. B's Grocery Store.

## OPERATION MILITARY KIDS

### 4-H program helps children of deployed parents

BY KENNA WALSH

The Valdosta Daily Times

VALDOSTA — Kids of National Guard members and reservists face unique situations when their parents are called to duty and they are rendered "suddenly military." These children continue to attend school and participate in daily activities while enduring difficulties associated with deployment.

During the holidays, missing a loved one deepens, and the parent at home faces hardships alone.

Active duty military personnel have support networks to help them with tough times through base services, but families of National Guard members and reservists are often scattered through areas that may not be near their armory.

Members of the National 4-H organization had an idea to pool resources and support these families. "Operation Military Kids" began in 2004 and aims to help service men and women by combining 4-H capabilities with community support.

Faye Belflower, 4-H ambassador for Turner County, said the Army has a long-standing rela-

"How do you tell a 5-year-old that mom or dad is gone, but not at war?"

— Faye Belflower

tionship with 4-H and knew they were the "go-to for getting it done."

The program works with a variety of situations, from persons deployed to war activity zones to stateside operations, like rescue efforts for Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

"How do you tell a 5-year-old that mom or dad is gone, but not at war?" Belflower said.

National Guard members face this situation when called to duty. After Hurricane Katrina struck in late August, National Guard soldiers were flown home from Iraq only to scatter locally to help recovery in damaged areas.

The program aids people where they need it most.

Belflower said 20 states support Operation Military Kids with 14 more and Puerto Rico joining forces in 2006.

Lowndes County supports the

program and helps families of the 48th Brigade's Alpha Company.

4-H workers give out "Hero Packs," which are backpacks filled with a variety of goods, including a camera, picture frame and datebook organizer. Children of deployed moms or dads can fill out a request form for the pack.

Belflower said 4-H offers recreation, social and educational programs for military kids living in civilian communities.

Other services include stress management and time-off for parents left at home.

In the summer, the program will send these children free-of-charge to camp at the Wahsega 4-H Center, normally a \$200 fee.

Belflower urges communities to take notice of affected families in their city or county.

"Just because troops come home doesn't mean the need ends," Belflower said.

For information on the program, visit [www.operationmilitarykids.org](http://www.operationmilitarykids.org) or call the Lowndes County Extension Service at 333-5185.



## Fire safety during the

BRIANNE SWEETLAND

The Valdosta Daily Times

VALDOSTA — A few years ago, the Valdosta Fire Department responded to a house fire on Christmas Day.

The fire was a result of improper and overloaded wiring on the family's Christmas tree, a problem that could have been prevented with a simple inspection of the wiring.

Because of the fire, the family lost all its Christmas gifts and had significant damage to its home, Valdosta Fire Chief J.D. Rice said.

But the damage could have been worse.

Fires during the holiday season injure 2,600 individuals nationwide and cause more than \$900 million in damage, according to the U.S. Fire Administration.

Because of the risk holiday decor may pose, Rice and Chief Jim Fielding, Lowndes County Fire Rescue, want residents to be safe.

Here are some fire safety tips to keep loved ones safe during the holidays:

### Christmas trees

In less than two minutes, the beautifully decorated Christmas tree can become kindling, emit-

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