



VenturaCountyStar

Capturing memories for military

Families receive free portrait photos thanks to group

By Rachel McGrath
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For 21-year-old Melissa Miller, the thought of her Seabee husband being deployed overseas again is almost too much to bear.

But thanks to a charity called Operation: Love ReUnited and a Simi Valley photographer, she and her husband — Navy constructionman Bobby Miller — will have special photos of the family together to cherish while they're apart.

Originally from Montana, Bobby Miller went off to boot camp for 18 months just two weeks after his son, Ezekiel, now 2, was born.

He missed the birth of daughter Mackenzie because he was on deployment in Guam.

This year, on Mackenzie's first birthday, Aug. 11, he went overseas once again — this time to Iraq or Kuwait for at least six months, where he will be involved in security for military convoys.

"We wanted to get pictures done of him in his military uniform, but we had a problem with paying \$300 to \$400 for them. We just didn't have the money," said Melissa Miller, who receives \$500 every two weeks while her husband is on deployment.

Then she saw an ad on the Internet for Operation: Love ReUnited — an organization started by military wife Tonee Lawrence in Denver.



Its goal, she says, is "to allow photographers to lend their creative energies to raising the morale of our men and women in uniform."

Melissa Miller got in touch with Charise Proctor, a professional photographer in Simi Valley who is listed on the organization's Web site as an approved photographer.

Proctor offers military families a free photo session before or during deployment, and then puts together a photo album of 25 to 50 images, "both posed family portraits and natural interactions," she said.

The album is sent to the loved one overseas.

She offers a second free photo session to capture their homecoming.

Military families based at Naval Base Ventura County have been contacting Proctor as part of Operation: Love ReUnited.

"It's a great cause and something little I can do for our military families," the photographer said. "I'm just trying to give back a little."

She has encouraged her best friend, Cheyenne Ritchie-McGowan, a photographer based in Moorpark, to also sign up with the organization.

Ritchie-McGowan's brother, Doyle Ritchie, is in the Army and has just returned from a tour of duty in Iraq.

"I know how important it is for him to get family pictures from home," Ritchie-McGowan said. "And I just wanted to give something back to the soldiers who give so much."

On a recent Sunday afternoon, Proctor spent several hours with Bobby and Melissa Miller and their two children on the beach, capturing their time together. She also shot a formal family portrait with Bobby Miller in uniform.

Melissa Miller says she's deeply grateful to Proctor.

"These are the first pictures we have ever had done," she said. "So this means a lot, knowing we took pictures together, and he was there to see the kids' interaction."

Proctor describes the photo shoot as "an eye-opening experience and very emotional. It definitely makes the war a reality," she said.

She said she's glad she's been able to give Melissa Miller something she wanted so badly — "a formal portrait of the family she could hang in her home so the kids can see Daddy."

To learn more

Military families can contact Charise Proctor through her Web site at www.photographybycharise.com and Cheyenne Ritchie-McGowan through her Web site at www.pinkfeetphotography.com.

