

Christmas brighter for children of military families, thanks to UMHB student project

December 14, 2007

Posted: 12/14/07

Two-year-old Anna Phillips works on painting the interior of a new playhouse built by students at the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor.

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BELTON—Globs of blue paint drip from 2-year-old Reagan Clark's tiny hands. But before they form much of a puddle, he offers a high five to the blank canvas of his playhouse. He admires his artwork with pride and repeats his mark several times, then he immediately whirls around with a wide grin and fresh paint on his face, ready to go back for more.

Students built and painted four playhouses for four military families from First Baptist Church in Belton. All of the families have young children whose fathers won't be home for Christmas.

"It's just going to make it a little brighter this Christmas with Dad not at home," said Jennifer Larkin, a UMHB freshman from Flower Mound.

The painting extravaganza was incorporated into the university's traditional Hanging of the Wreaths event.

While students started painting the playhouses early in the day, they left enough to keep the children involved. For two hours, children were allowed to decorate the playhouses however they wanted.

As Jennifer Clark watched her children, Reagan and 5-year-old Easton, decorate their playhouse, a wave of emotion overcame her. Even though she wore a smile, tears streamed down her face.

"How do you put into words the thoughtfulness?" she said as she wiped away the tears. "The thoughtfulness that someone thinks about me. Why me? ... It's amazing."

This is the Clark family's second time to be stationed in Fort Hood. With fingers crossed, Clark said, she expects her husband to be home in January after a 15-month tour of duty.

"My kids are missing a whole lot with their dad, and I always wish I could do more," Clark said. "I could've bought a playhouse, but I couldn't put it

together. I couldn't paint it. ... And there wouldn't be the fellowship."

Because military families frequently have to move, Clark said it's hard to bring everything with them each time they relocate.

"Anything that is too big gets left behind," she said.

But the children's playhouse will make the move with the family when the time comes, she said. "We'll always have it to remember Belton and UMHB."

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