

Front page mention (below)

MILITARY

Project records memories before deployments

A national nonprofit group is working with local photographers to provide photo sessions and albums to families with loved ones who are leaving on deployments. At right, Ericka and Chad Vanoni are pictured with their daughter, Corene, 9, and son, Kael, 2. The Vanonis participated in the Operation Love Reunited project.

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PHOTO PROVIDED BY ANGELA WILKES/ANGELA WILKES PHOTOGRAPHY

Actual article (below)

Program provides free family photos for deploying troops

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Ericka and Chad Vanoni can't be close while he is in Afghanistan the next few months, but a program that offers family portraits to deploying military members has helped make the separation easier.

Operation Love Reunited is a national nonprofit group that works with local photographers to provide photo sessions and albums to military families.

There is no charge. Chad Vanoni is a captain with the Oklahoma National Guard's 45th Infantry Brigade, which left for Afghanistan in June and is expected to return in March.

The Vanonis, who live in Moore, took family portraits with Edmond photographer Angela Wilkes while Chad Vanoni was home on leave last month.

"It means a lot," Ericka Vanoni said.

"I think it's really neat that they send them overseas for the soldiers."

Wilkes is the regional coordinator for the group in Oklahoma. She said each family gets three photo sessions and an album that can be taken on deployment.

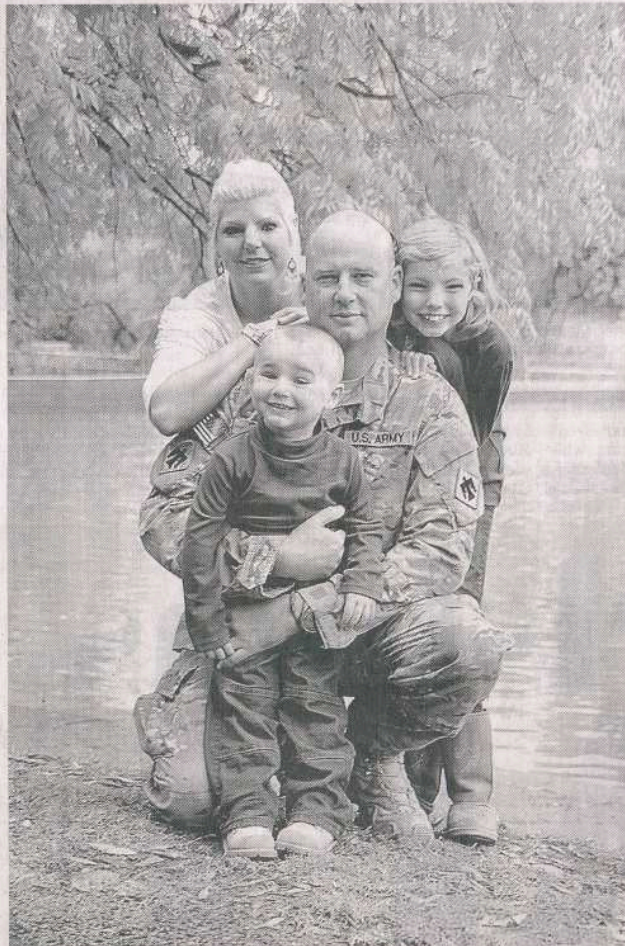
Wilkes said she usually shoots homecoming ceremonies as well.

She was one of the first photographers who signed on when the project started in 2006.

"I've always supported the military in any way I could, and I thought it was a great thing," Wilkes said.

"There wasn't anything like this when we started."

The project has grown into an international effort. Photographers have signed on in Germany and other parts of Europe to



Ericka and Chad Vanoni are pictured with their daughter, Corene, 9, and son, Kael, 2. The family participated in Project Love Reunited, which offers family portraits free to deploying members of the military.

PHOTOS PROVIDED BY ANGELA WILKES PHOTOGRAPHY

shoot U.S. military members at installations there, and a branch started in Australia to serve their military members.

"It's very rewarding,"

Wilkes said.

"It's almost humbling to get to be a part of these people's lives at such an emotional point. There are tears and laughter."

Wilkes said many spouses left behind must essentially be single parents while also worrying about what can happen on a deployment.



Capt. Chad Vanoni and his son, Kael.

“

It's almost humbling to get to be a part of these people's lives at such an emotional point. ... Any little thing we can do to help them feel at home is good."

ANGELA WILKES
EDMOND
PHOTOGRAPHER

"Any little thing we can do to help them feel at home is good," Wilkes said.

Ericka Vanoni said the photos are also good for her children, who have something of their father to look at every day while he is gone.

"It's an excellent service they provide," Vanoni said. "It's not cheap to get photos taken, and it's a free service they offer. It's nice they have a sense of patriotism and offer that."