



Sunday, September 13, 2009

Fort Benning troops visit Noah's Ark

Sunday, September 13, 2009



By Valerie Baldowski

vbaldowski@henryherald.com

Two busloads of U.S. Army soldiers from the Warrior Transition Battalion at Fort Benning recently made their second annual visit to the Noah's Ark animal and children's shelter in Locust Grove.

More than two hours before their arrival, supporters began gathering in front of Locust Grove City Hall, where a sign on the street welcomed the troops.

Others stood in front of the businesses lining Ga. Highway 42, waiting to greet the troops as they rode by on their way to the shelter. Along the way, the soldiers made a stop at Locust Grove Elementary School, where the students and teachers welcomed them.

U.S. Army Sgt. Clarence Smith, with his 15-month-old nephew Daveon Cusic riding on his shoulders, said his interest in Noah's Ark was sparked by Staff Sgt. Bridgette Vickers, who coordinated this year's visit.

Photo by Valerie Baldowski/// U.S. Army Sgt. Clarence Smith holds his nephew, 15-month-old Daveon Cusic, while talking to Barbara Smith. The soldier was among two busloads of troops from Fort Benning visiting Noah's Ark last week.

"I saw [Sgt.] Vickers planning the trip," said Smith. "She described it to us, and I had to come up here and do my part to help out."

The visit to Noah's Ark was a new experience for him, he said, and helped boost the morale of participants. "This was the first time I laid eyes on it, and it looked wonderful," he said.

Upon arrival, the soldiers were led through the front gates of Noah's Ark by a police escort. The soldiers were greeted by Noah's Ark employees, officials from the City of Locust Grove and Henry County, and other supporters, as they got off the buses.

They were also treated to lunch before touring the grounds and distributing donations to the facility.

The troops' donations, said Smith, included sleeping bags, paper, canned goods and snacks.

Diane Smith (no relation to Clarence Smith), a spokesperson for Noah's Ark, said personnel at the facility were grateful for the return visit.

"Last year was phenomenal," she said. "We're very touched by the fact that with all they've already given, that they want to give more."

The visit, she said, benefited the troops as well as Noah's Ark.

"We're also glad that we can give back to them, because they come here, and they're able to have a day of relaxation and fun and get to see the animals," Diane Smith said.

U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Tenea Moore said Thursday's visit was voluntary, and provided a break from what the soldiers were accustomed to.

"It was different," said Moore. "It was nice, with the school and all the kids."

According to Vickers, the battalion, formerly called the Wounded Soldiers Battalion, helps soldiers transition back either into civilian life or into the military work force.