

Singer strikes chord with military kids

Tree lighting turns emotional with military-themed song

By ANN WALLACE • The Leaf-Chronicle • December 14, 2008

The weather outside was chilly, but the students and families of Ringgold Elementary school didn't seem to care as they gathered for an old-fashioned tree lighting and schoolwide sing-along Friday night.

"Our goal was to have a fun family night where memories are made and parents can bring their kids and enjoy without any expense," said Principal Clara Patterson.

More than 400 people showed up to be part of what Patterson hopes to become an annual tradition for the school.

Families looked for their special ornaments scattered across the boughs.

A chorus of "oohs" and "aahs" filled the air as the faces of boys and girls beamed.

Three special visitors added flavor. Santa Claus made a stopover. Mrs. Claus read stories to the students, and Randy Beard provided chuckles and poignancy for the evening.

Beard is a songwriter and former teacher who as an educational consultant presents entertainment with curriculum reinforcement value at schools across the country.

Beard will visit Ringgold Elementary through the coming school year helping to implement further support programs for students from military families.

During an afternoon program, he offered the students a sampling of the musical fare that would be part of the tree-lighting festivities.

Beard wrote a song called "You're Never Alone," dedicated to the youngsters of military parents.

"I didn't do this for money," Beard said. "I come in contact with so many kids at military bases, and they are going through so much."

Some students fidgeted, some stared into space, and some looked grim. Some had neutral facial expressions as Beard sang.

It was evident that the war on terrorism is not some distant current events issue for most of them.

Many of these youngsters are veterans at holding their emotions inside, they don't wear a uniform, but they have made and continue to make the march of sacrifice.

Almost every Ringgold student raised a hand when Beard asked if they had a military parent.

Beard's voice crooned a sauntering melody as the lyrics he wrote registered with many boys and girls who have spent almost half of their lives separated from one or both parents by deployments to either Afghanistan or Iraq.

If lumps in the throat were contagious, teachers and students had the same bug.

After Beard completed the program, one little girl who looked to be about 8 or 9 reached for her teacher's arms with tears streaming down her cheeks, saying: "That song about mommies and daddies, I'm one of those military kids, and it hurts sometimes."

A red-headed, third-grade student approached Beard holding something in his clinched fist.

He looked up at Beard and opened his hand.

"These are my dad's tags," he said. "I keep them with me every day."

The boy said his dad was in Afghanistan now and had been in Iraq before.

Water edged his eyelashes as he took a deep breath because he wanted to say something to Beard: "My dad is not only serving, but he's risking his life for thousands of people. Every country has to have heroes, they all do, but my dad is mine."

The red-headed boy said he was a big brother and had a baby brother at home. Then he sighed, scanned the beams of the gymnasium as if he were looking for some answer, took another deep breath and walked across the floor trailing his classmates.

As families gathered around the lighted tree during the sing-along festivities that night, it was apparent many children still have a deployed parent.

Most of the little ones smiled because, after all, they are kids embracing the sheer joy of the season.

Beard served up the jolly holiday musical fare, but when he sang his song for the military kids — his voice cracked as he watched a little girl waist-high to her uniformed dad wave her hands while looking at her father, who was looking at her with obvious adoration.

Beard had to stop, took a deep breath like his red-headed young friend earlier in the day and sang the song again.

All Fort Campbell soldiers are not home in Clarksville this holiday, but Beard's song served as a vocal reminder to military kids that "You're Never Alone."

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Songwriter Randy Beard sings with Ringgold Elementary School students Friday night following a family tree lighting ceremony. Beard performed a song he wrote called "You're Never Alone," dedicated to the youngsters of military parents. (Beth Liggett Cogbill/The Leaf-Chronicle)



A group of Ringgold Elementary students sing along with songwriter Randy Beard during a performance following a family tree lighting ceremony Friday night at the school. (Beth Liggett Cogbill/The Leaf-Chronicle)