



Troops in Iraq to tune in Mankato symphony

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MANKATO —

Despite the hour, Staff Sgt. Tamatha Smith is going to try and gather as many fellow servicemen as she can to watch a concert put on especially for them and their loved ones Tuesday morning in Iraq.

It'll be about 4:30 a.m. in Taji where Smith is stationed when the Mankato Symphony Orchestra concert kicks off. For the orchestra, however, and the group of deployed troops' family and friends in the audience, it'll be 6:30 p.m. Monday.

Yet, despite the two different dates of the same concert, the performance will be live.

Confused? It's actually pretty simple, Smith said. She has the capabilities to connect with Mankato via video teleconference.

Smith worked with the National Guard Armory in Mankato, where the symphony will perform, to set up a live teleconference during the concert.

Smith's mother, Darlene Langevin, is active with Camp CHS, a southern Minnesota organization dedicated to supporting Minnesota military members and their families. She has cared for Smith's two children, Matea and Anthony, while Smith served in Iraq. Langevin also helped coordinate the concert teleconference.

Because of the time difference, Smith and other troops will be getting up early in the morning for this little treat. But Smith says it's well worth it.

The teleconference equipment has allowed them to communicate often with family members and to watch various school presentations, such as Christmas concerts and high school band performances. But they don't see many adult programs.

"We do a lot of kid-oriented things," Smith said during a phone interview from Taji. "This is for adults."

The orchestra will play "Festive Overture in A Major, Op. 96" and "Symphony No. 5 in D Minor, Op. 47," said general manager Michelle Behsman. The public is welcome to attend.

"But our primary goal is to do this live broadcast to the troops and to invite families who have soldiers there," Behsman said. "I want to make sure the families have seats for the concert."

Smith said the event wouldn't be possible without the Freedom Calls Foundation, an organization that deploys state-of-the-art technology to troops overseas so they can communicate with family members and friends. Video conferencing, instant messaging and Internet telephone calls are among the free services the foundation offers troops.

The technology allows Smith to see Matea and Anthony about once a month. She'll see and speak with them again before or after the concert early Tuesday (her time).