

Snowball Express Benefits Local Families Who Lost Military Parent

BY MICHAEL WADDELL, Special to The Daily News

Seven local families are in Dallas/Fort Worth this week for the 11th annual Snowball Express Weekend, an all-expense-paid holiday gala for children of fallen military heroes.

They are among approximately 1,800 children and spouses of fallen military participating in the event that runs Dec. 11-15.

Created in 2006, Snowball Express is a nonprofit organization run by mostly volunteers with the mission of bringing hope and new memories to the children of military personnel who died while on active duty since Sept. 11, 2001.

“Snowball Express is a wonderful organization. My families really love it,” said [Tami Edwards](#), support coordinator for West TN Survivor Outreach Services, which assists local families in preparing for the trip. “They have a bunch of activities that revolve around these children who’ve lost their parent, as a way to honor the ultimate sacrifice of the fallen hero.”

The families arrived at Memphis International Airport early Sunday morning, Dec. 11, and were greeted by Keys, a friendly therapy dog from West TN Therapy Dogs that frequents the airport and other facilities around the city to offer a calming presence and lift spirits. He and his handler, Jo Ann Fusco, visited and played with the kids.

“We’re always happy to host events like these,” said Rob Robertson, spokesman for Memphis International Airport. “It’s something we look forward to, and we’re pleased to be able to play a small role in such a great event.”

The children, ages 5 to 15, will enjoy a variety of fun activities while in Dallas/Fort Worth that were not revealed until they arrived. This year, they will be treated with a tour of the Fort Worth Museum of Science and History, a night at Medieval Times, and a private concert from Oscar-nominated actor Gary Sinise and the Lt. Dan Band, as well as the chance to visit a Neiman Marcus room to pick out gifts for their parent.

“They take amazing care of you from start to finish,” said [Carrie Bell](#), wife of Army officer [Percy Bell](#), who died in the line of duty in April 2014. This is the second year that the Bells’ daughter, 7-year-old Anneliese, has gotten to go to the Snowball Express Weekend. “They really do a lot for them, and the kids have a lot of fun with it.”

The event will also feature a Walk of Gratitude with a fire and police procession to honor the soldiers.

“They can create a lot of happy memories and support each other because that’s something as a



Two girls attending the Snowball Express Weekend meet handler Jo Ann Fusco and therapy dog Keys at Memphis International before their flight.

(Daily News/Michael Waddell)

military child you don't always get in the civilian world," Edwards said.

Parents of children of fallen soldiers often claim that their child is reserved, withdrawn, or unwilling to talk about their loss, so the weekend is a way for them to socialize with others in a similar situation.

"They want to make sure that each child who has lost a parent can connect with other children who are going through the same thing so that they don't feel alone," Edwards said. "So many of the kids go back each year because they've made relationships with other kids from across the United States. They look so forward to going back and doing it each year."

Parents also have activities they do together.

"It's a good bonding opportunity for everybody," Bell said.

Program sponsors include American Airlines, The Neiman Marcus Group, Yum! Brands, E & J Gallo Winery, Airpower Foundation, Bell Helicopters, Hero Miles, and Green Bean Coffee.

A candlelight service honoring the soldiers took place on Dec. 10 in Frayser, and this Saturday, Dec. 17, a wreath ceremony will be held locally at West Tennessee and Arlington national cemeteries, as well as at military cemeteries across the country. Several thousand wreaths will be placed on the tombstones of fallen military personnel at 11 a.m.