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USO Puget Sound receives regional award from leading US Army support organization McChord Center honored for exceptional service

SEATTLE --- For “exceptional volunteer service” to over 29,000 service members, retirees, and their family members in 2006, the USO Puget Sound McChord Center at McChord Air Force Base has been awarded the Sixth Region Public Service Award by the Association of U.S. Army (AUSA). An awards ceremony is scheduled for Wednesday, May 16 at 2:00 p.m. at the McChord USO Center on McChord Air Force Base.

Tom Hinman, president and executive director of the USO Puget Sound, said “this award recognizes our staff and USO volunteers -- the ‘army of gratitude’ – that provide a ‘home away from home’ for our men and women in uniform, and their ongoing support to the family members left behind during deployment.”

Hinman added that the award means a great deal coming from the AUSA. “As the nation’s leading private, army support organization, the AUSA understands the value of civilian support to America’s soldiers and how that service impacts morale,” said Hinman. “When you see the devotion of our staff and volunteers whom are ready and willing, at any hour of the day, to make sure every soldier is given a care package and a smile as they leave for their deployment, you begin to understand the impact of the USO.”

The AUSA recognizes what they call the “USO volunteer’s exceptional devotion to duty,” and referred to the months of June through September of 2006 when the USO Center served over 13,000 military members during deployments and relocation of families. The AUSA also recognized two programs initiated through the USO McChord Center called the United Through Reading program and the ongoing collection of food, and toiletries for families of deployed service members in cooperation with other service partners.

Tracye Kakely, manager of the USO McChord Center, said that the United Through Reading program is set-up at the McChord center and provides military members with the opportunity to video tape themselves reading a favorite bedtime story. The video is then sent to the family once the member is deployed. “It is an important tool for soldiers to stay connected with their children during deployment,” said Kakely, “It brings comfort to a child to see mom or dad and to hear their voice reading a favorite story.”

Wednesday’s ceremony also includes recognition for the 2007 Sergeant Major of the Army William G. Bainbridge Award of Excellence. Retired U.S. Army Command Sergeant Major, Herb Schmeling of Graham, is recognized for his exceptional leadership and volunteer work through the USO and other civic organizations that connect local communities in service to the military.

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"I've worked with Herb for the past 10 months," said Kakely, "His leadership and insight has been invaluable to our expansion of services to military members and their families."

Schmeling says his motivation is simple, "The soldier always comes first. Our nation owes these men and women and their families so much. There is always something we can do to improve the quality of their lives and help them fulfill their duty," Schmeling said.

As a regional award winner, Schmeling is now in contention for the National AUSA Award in October 2007.

The Sixth Region of the AUSA includes Washington, Oregon, Northern California, and Nevada. Current and past recipients of the Public Service Award include Jim Willis, Director, Oregon Department of Veterans Affairs and the Defense Language Institute in California.

May is National Military Appreciation month.

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For over 40 years, the USO Puget Sound has served over 3 million of America's men and women in uniform and their families. The mission of the USO is to enhance the quality of life of the U.S. Armed forces personnel and their families worldwide and to create a cooperative relationship between U.S. military communities and those involved or supporting civilian communities.