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Newlyweds happy with uncertain future

Beth_Brogan@TimesRecord.Com

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FREEPORT — Karen Jalbert flew to Las Vegas last year on a whim and won \$650 at the MGM-Grand Hotel's Caribbean Stud table. Reveling in her luck, the Freeport woman spent that afternoon at the hotel spa, and met a chatty woman from Oklahoma whose son was headed to Iraq.

Eighteen months later — 12 of them spent e-mailing and calling back and forth to al Kut, Iraq — Karen wore a white silk dress with ruby-red trim and carried red Gerber daisies as she married Maj. Todd Mitchell on Saturday at the Harraseeket Inn.

In February 2006, Karen traveled to Las Vegas with her sister, Louise, who was eight months pregnant at the time. Karen gambled in the casino, worked out in the hotel gym and then headed for the spa.

"I was in a robe, waiting for a pedicure, and this bubbly lady sits down next to me," she said last month. "We're in big puffy chairs and she started to talk and talk and talk. She's good — she can get your whole life in five minutes. She said, 'Why haven't you found somebody?' I said, 'It's slim pickings.' She said, 'You sound like a good match for my son.'"

Her son, U.S. Army Maj. Todd Mitchell, was about to be deployed to Iraq. Mitchell's mother, Sue Maxwell, gave Karen her son's information, and she called him just before he left for war in April

Nation not at war, military is

By [Beth Brogan](mailto:Beth_Brogan@TimesRecord.Com), Times Record Staff

FREEPORT — Army Maj. Todd Mitchell said he feels strongly that people who serve, whether or not they're in the military, should not be taken for granted, since "they do it because they see a need and they're willing to sacrifice their time for something they believe in. People who badmouth the military, or this or that — not necessarily now, but in generations past, and particularly the Vietnam vets — they ruined a whole generation of these guys, and that's just a shame."

"We don't get paid a lot and in a lot of ways it's a thankless job, but we really, really appreciate

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2006. His mother, Todd said earlier this month, described Karen as "a great girl" and "a real go-getter, very bright, articulate, funny and cute."

"He said when we got off the phone, he knew I was the one," Karen said. "I believed in him, but Louise and everyone though it was not going to be real, so I started questioning it."

Finally, Todd sent a photo and scanned his license to prove who he was: A graduate of the University of Illinois, Mitchell joined the National Guard at age 17. ROTC put him through college and from there he was commissioned into the U.S. Army. He's been in active duty since 1996, stationed in Korea and throughout the U.S., serving in the field artillery and currently as the adjutant for an infantry brigade in the 101st Airborne Division. He is scheduled to receive a master's degree in military history from Louisiana State University next month.

"It wasn't until we exchanged a few e-mails that she became really intriguing to me," Mitchell said. "She's just a special girl. She's done so many different things. She's had her own business and she's a 'lobstress.' I could tell she was not your normal girl."

Local girl

A native of Lewiston, Karen, 34, graduated from Chaminade University of Honolulu. After teaching for awhile, landscaping and driving an Airborne Express truck in Portland, in 2000 she started CleanStart, a commercial construction and window cleaning business that, she said, was "more successful than I could have ever imagined."

Todd sent Karen hand-written notes from foxholes in Iraq, and she worried when she didn't hear from him. His identical twin brother, Robb — also a U.S. Army major now in Iraq, but at the time still in the U.S. — told her that if there was bad news, "You'd be the first to know after our parents."

Todd was a member of a small team at Camp Delta in al Kut that advised and trained the Iraqi border patrol near the border with Iran. He carried his weapon with him at all times.

"The patrol was put up several months after the ground war ended and we're slowly giving them resources and providing them training," he said. "Their biggest job is stopping IEDs (improvised explosive devices) and weapons from crossing the border."

A few times, he cut calls with Karen short because of nearby explosions because, he said, he thought they'd upset her.

"I can't describe it being over there," Todd said. "The whole country of Iraq is in active combat."

the folks who support us," he said, noting the thousands of people who send items such as toothpaste, razor blades and coffee — as well as letters and pictures — through a program known as anysoldier.com that disperses packages sent through the organization.

"Whole third-grade classes would draw a flag on one side, and write a note on the other," he said, noting the delight of soldiers receiving the packages.

"What I've heard the politicians say is, 'We're a nation at war,'" Mitchell said. "It's not true. We're a military at war. The nation is not at war, because it doesn't touch most people."

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A year ago, on Thanksgiving Day, Karen finally sent Todd her photo.

"Right away he e-mailed me and said he thought I was beautiful," she said. "He kept all the e-mails. He said he thought it would be cute when we're 80 years old."

In March, Karen took a chance and flew to Fort Hood in Texas to try to meet Todd's plane when he returned from Iraq.

"I went to this tourist center and said, 'There's a flight coming in from Iraq. Can you tell me what gym they'll come in to?' The lady asked what unit, but I didn't know. She said, 'Honey, your husband is coming home from Iraq and you don't what unit he's in?' I was so embarrassed."

She returned the next day, and the next, and finally found herself waiting in the right gym with family members of the soldiers.

"I was waiting and waiting, and he's texting me on my cell, so I know he's on the bus," she said. "They had to drop off their weapons first. Then they all walked in and he's the last one. I can't read his name tag, so how I knew it was him was he was like (she squints), and I went like this (she squints again), and we said, 'It's you.' Then I went down from the bleachers and he hugged me."

The two spent about a month driving around the country seeing family, never turning on the radio, Karen said, and instead telling stories. When they stopped in Florida to see her family, Todd said he was nervous about meeting Karen's father because "she had told me for months that he was pretty tough. He'd tell her (old) boyfriends, 'Good luck to you.' I was kind of skeptical, but she kept saying, 'Everyone's a big fan of yours. You're nothing like (anyone) I've gone out with before.'"

A budding relationship

When they got to Maine, Todd went lobstering and kayaking with Karen. After the first few months together, during which "we were inseparable," Todd said, Karen joined him permanently at Fort Campbell on the Kentucky-Tennessee border, his current duty station.

Todd found out in April that he would be deployed to Afghanistan in April 2008 for 15 months. At that point, he said, they decided, to spend as much time together as they could before he left. Soon, however, he said, "We realized, 'You know what? This is a good thing we've got going on here. ... It's a tough job I have here, and with her being in a new place, why don't we make this kind of permanent?'"

They shopped for rings and Todd proposed. Karen said last month that while she knows he will head to Afghanistan next spring, she thinks it will be easier for her this time because she knows Todd now and "I know he loves what he does. Either you marry it or you don't. I'm proud of him, that he loves what he does, and is very proud of his country."

After a honeymoon at the islands of Turks and Caicos, the Mitchells will return to Fort Campbell, but plans have changed since the proposal: Late last month, Todd's brigade commander called him into his office. Faced with deciding who would stay behind at Fort Campbell when the unit deployed to Afghanistan, he chose Todd to

lead the skeleton crew that will prepare new soldiers and take care of casualties and families stateside.

Karen was ecstatic, Todd said, "but I had mixed emotions. It was like being kicked off the island. For the past six months I've been gearing up to go next April, learning my role on the team. Now those 13 people will go (without me)."

"I was mentally preparing myself not to see him," Karen said, "just as he was mentally preparing himself to go to war. He still could get called out there. You never know with the Army. You just go with the flow and be prepared."

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