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Today: December 22, 2006 at 7:11:12 PST

LOOKING IN ON: LAS VEGAS SCENE

Troops get packages of cheer from comedian, girlfriend

By Jerry Fink

Las Vegas Sun

Helping our troops overseas is no laughing matter to comedian Bruce "Big John" Mickelson, one of the stars of "Viva Las Vegas!"

He and girlfriend Kristen Knight have been sending care packages to military men and women in the Middle East for a few months. So far, they've sent more than 40 boxes of goods, which included hygiene products and beef jerky.

"Simple things you wouldn't normally think of," said Mickelson, who gets the names of recipients from the Web site anysoldier.com. The site was set up for military personnel who might not have anyone at home to send them packages. "Most want a letter from somebody back here."

If Mickelson is in the mood, he might write that "Viva Las Vegas" will be closing after 15 years on Dec. 30. The low-budget production debuted at the Sands in 1991 and moved to the Stratosphere five years later. Producer Dick Feeny is looking for a new home for the show.

While waiting to see what happens with "Viva," Mickelson is looking at working on cruise ships. Right now, he said, his focus is on the troops. He uses the money he makes selling DVDs and T-shirts at the "Viva" performances to fund his charitable project.

"The poor kids in Iraq have to pay \$20 for a six-pack of Coke and they can't get anything at the Post Exchange because it's always running out of stuff," said Mickelson, who has been sending packages to a female soldier.

"The girl we're helping has 10 or 12 troops under her control and when she



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gets the boxes they have a little party and dole out the items," he said. "It makes them feel good. Makes us feel good, too."

Good tidings for the J.J. Johnigan family

Nevada residents opened their hearts and wallets to help a Las Vegas family facing a dark Christmas.

When a plea for help went out around Thanksgiving on behalf of the Jerold "J.J." Johnigan family, almost \$10,000 came pouring in.

This week, the family of five began moving from a 400-square-foot apartment in a crime-infested neighborhood off the Strip to an 1,100-square-foot, three-bedroom, 1 1/2-bath apartment in a safer neighborhood near Spring Mountain Road and Jones Boulevard.

"Their life has changed," said John Smith, head of Housing for Nevada, a nonprofit organization that helps needy people buy homes or find improved living arrangements. "We are still working with him so he can become a homeowner."

He said it will take about a year for the Johnigans to qualify to buy a house - a process that includes financial counseling and some training.

"Moving out of that last apartment was a big step for us," said Johnigan, who shines shoes at the Triple George Grill. After the new year, he may be taking over a mobile auto detailing business.

Swedish blues

Say what?

Yes, Andy Walo - blues guitarist and native of Sweden - is scheduled to perform at three venues in Las Vegas over the holidays.

He plays at King Tut's, 6138 W. Charleston Blvd., at 9 tonight and at The Sand Dollar, 3355 Spring Mountain Road, at 10 p.m. Saturday. Walo will be at the House of Blues on Thursday.

Jerry Fink can be reached at 259-4058 or at jerry@lasvegassun.com.

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