

# Lifestyles

## YMCA gives military families access to exercise

By Amy KD Tobitt  
THE CHRONICLE

Five-year-old Rachel LoPiparo gets very excited when she sees her mom throw on her workout gear because it means they are heading to the Oviedo YMCA for some valuable time together. Participating in YMCA programs is a positive way, her mother, Christina, said, to combat daily stressors while maintaining good health.

Two to three times a week, Christina and Rachel reap the rewards of exercise as they anxiously await the return of her husband, Joseph, an Army National Guard Reservist, currently stationed in Kuwait.

Through the Armed Services YMCA and Department of Defense Outreach Initiative, the LoPiparos have been given complimentary access to programs at 25 Y Family Center locations in Central Florida. According to the ASYMCA website, "membership fees are underwritten by the DoD and are administered through Military OneSource," an information and referral service for military families.

According to Maryalicia Johnson, senior director of media relations and public awareness for YMCA of Central Florida, there are currently 884 families, which equates to 2,290 people, enrolled in the military outreach program in Central Florida. According to the ASYMCA website, eligible families that can participate in the program include: families of those deployed in the National Guard and the Reserves, active duty assigned to independent duty station personnel and their families as well as relocated spouses and family members of deployed active duty personnel.

Eligible military families who register for membership must commit to visiting the facility several times a week in order to maintain their membership status.

Christina said she is thankful to have access to such a supportive program.

Balancing work, school and motherhood has been especially challenging over the past year since Joseph was deployed, she explained. Not only does Christina currently play the role of both mom and dad, she works full-time as a dental assistant in Oviedo and takes classes toward a



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**PAPA BEAR:** Rachel LoPiparo with a military bear that plays her father's voice.

degree in nursing. While schedules tend to be crazy at times, Christina said working out and spending time with her daughter, no matter how tired she is at the end of the day, always makes her feel better.

"Working out helps relieve stress. I always would go running; that's how I lost weight after my daughter was born. Now I like going to the gym and it tends to help. It's stressful not to be able to talk to [Joseph] so exercising helps," she said.

Over the past year, Rachel has taken swimming lessons as well as tumbling and dance classes while her mother, Christina, has committed to weekly exercise classes.

"I like the step classes," Christina said. "I try to go two to three times a week. We go mostly on the weekends now that Rachel is in kindergarten," she added.

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# Program provides support for families

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Rachel said she always enjoys going to the Oviedo YMCA because she gets to play house and meet new friends. "I really like playing on the chalkboard - that's where I go first," said Rachel as she described the playroom.

Johnson said the military program has provided a real boost for local families.

"When someone is overseas, the spouse often has to balance all facets of daily life on his or her own, which can be extremely stressful," Johnson said. Families who participate in a regular program not only benefit from the obvious physical benefits, but the



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**MILITARY MAMA:** Christina Lopiparo with her daughter, Rachel, at their home in Geneva.

camaraderie and fellowship gained by being a part of the YMCA family, she

said. "There are so many health benefits to regular

exercise," Johnson said. Staying active not only helps people stay in good physical shape, but it helps relieve tension and manage emotions during an otherwise stressful time, she added.

"This program is definitely a positive aspect for families. It allows people to stay connected in their community and with other military families so they can support each other. We want to be able to provide that network," Johnson said.

It is especially important, Johnson added, to keep children involved in programs and physically active when a parent or sibling is on deployment. "Going to the YMCA is

also a stress reliever for kids. It provides them with another family and gives them a support group of their own," Johnson said.

Johnson said the Oviedo location has an education-based children's center with a large outdoor playground, and an indoor pool available for free play and lessons.

"Some of the older kids, especially the boys, like to go upstairs (to the workout area) with mom to the walking trail and walk together -- it makes them feel so grown up," she said. Most importantly, mom and son are exercising and spending time together."