

USO renovates Columbia Metropolitan Airport Center

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By CASSIE COPE - ccopec@thestate.com

When the executive director of Columbia Metropolitan Airport was in the military and needed a sanctuary while traveling with his family, the United Service Organizations provided one.

Now, the airport is providing space for a newly renovated USO branch.

“They’re first-class people, and having this facility be first class was the least we could do,” said Executive Director Dan Mann.

The USO office in the airport originally opened in 2010.

“A location here in Columbia at the airport is one of the most important places we can be,” said Alan Reyes, USO senior vice president for operations.

With Fort Jackson nearby and many military bases across the state, troops travel through the airport often.

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The Armed Forces Families Foundation, working through Columbia Taco Bells, helped pay for the renovations by taking donations for a year.

Mann served from 1983 to 1992. He used USO branches when traveling with his wife for simple tasks, such as feeding his two babies and changing their diapers.

He joined the Air Force at 17 but said new soldiers “seem so much younger.”

Lashae Henderson, 20, just graduated from Advanced Individual Training at Fort Jackson and was in the middle of a nine-hour wait for her flight home to central New Jersey. She watched a movie in the hub and ate snacks that were provided while she waited.

“It’s a place to come and relax and wait on your flight and socialize,” Henderson said.

USO volunteer Gail Frick’s father was in the military, and she wants to give back.

“You hate the wars, but you love the soldiers and the troops,” Frick said.

Her granddaughter, 9-year-old Riley Barnes, volunteers with her and enjoys keeping the drink machines stocked.

If one drink moves, she dashes to the fridge to get another, Frick said.

USO volunteers are the first welcome for brand new soldiers to the Army family, said Peggy Combs, acting commanding general at Fort Jackson.

“It’s a place to feel appreciated because you have your own designated place to go to,” Henderson said.

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