

Tribal Member Sees The War In Iraq From The Front Row

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joined," she said, "but he wasn't thinking of Iraq."

In Kuwait, Erik and fellow-soldiers lived in tents with outside temperatures as hot as 130 degrees, said Debbie, and in June, 2003, the group entered Iraq, where the summer temperatures also soared well above 100.

Today, he is refurbishing hospitals and other buildings in Baghdad. He and his compatriots live in apartments they have had a hand in repairing. The accommodations are a big improvement, and the winter time temperature for them is now a comfortable 65 degrees.

As a Nuclear, Biological, Chemical Specialist with the 30th Medical unit in Baghdad, Estrada also has distributed uniforms that help defend soldiers against weapons of mass destruction.

of his earliest days, "He was just a really cute little kid."

Nicole, who works for a mortgage company in Northridge and goes to school at California State University/Northridge (with a minor in Native American studies), tells other stories.

"At a wedding one time (when he was really young), people were paying him to dance. Break dance. He was so cute and people just loved him in his little outfit."

He got into a fight once, Nicole remembered. It was the only one she remembered him being involved with. "He was standing up for a little kid who was getting picked on," she said.

"He did a lip sync in high school to the song, 'YMCA,'" said Nicole. "He jumped off the stage and was running through the audience and he had the whole audience laugh-



Photos courtesy of the Estrada Family

Two Of A Kind — Tribal Elder Bud Leno, 82, shows grandson Erik Estrada the uniform he wore while serving in World War II. It didn't take Erik long to try it on (see below). When Estrada came home from Baghdad for a Thanksgiving break, he tried on the uniform the Air Force gave to his grandfather, Bud Leno, when Leno was discharged at Fort Lewis in 1945. It fit Erik "like a glove," said Leno.

"Just keep your eyes open and don't trust too many people."

~ Tribal Elder Bud Leno on his advice to Grandson Erik Estrada

He makes sure the soldiers know how to use this equipment, said his Grandmother, Bud's wife, Tribal Elder Maxine Leno.

Being in a medical unit, "he had to drive the commander (the head doctor) to see where Saddam's sons were killed, said Debbie. "He thought really his commander just wanted to see them, too.

"He was in one of Saddam's palaces and got to see one of Saddam's bathrooms that was all gold," she said.

In February, his year in Baghdad comes to an end and Estrada will finish out seven months of his enlistment in Germany before coming home, said Debbie.

He looks forward to spending some of the dough he made, according to family members.

"Maybe starting a dance club," guessed Debbie.

"First, he wants to go to school and get a business degree," said his sister, Tribal member Nicole. "He wants to do something (big with it). He doesn't want the money to dwindle away."

Barely 21, Estrada has won the hearts of many. Of course, it is no surprise that his grandmother says

ing and clapping. He jumped off the stage. That's so Erik."

Nicole was into poetry at one point. Out of the blue, Erik wrote a poem and told her he wanted her to hear it. It was about his feelings, something very unexpected to Nicole, but she said that she became aware from that poem that she may have had an influence on him. He had gone out of his way to show her that what was important to her was also important to him. "That was really cool," she said.

"He was always into sports and girls, social things," said Debbie. He played soccer for the Edison High School Chargers in Huntington Beach, California, helping them in his senior year to win a state championship.

In Iraq, said Nicole, Estrada busied himself at Christmas decorating the tree and organizing the party. "He helped put that together. He is really good at boost-

ing morale. He gets everybody's spirits up."

When Estrada came home for two weeks leave at Thanksgiving, family and friends rented a limousine to pick him up at the airport,

said Nicole. Back home, he entertained "all the guys from soccer," his middle school principal and other friends — about 30 people. "All of us were there."

Famously, a car backfired while he was home and Estrada's head snapped around, members of his fam-

ily recalled. "That's a car, right?" he asked his family.

"He said it was strange driving down the streets without looking at the rooftops of buildings to see if anyone was up there with a rifle," said Debbie. "He said he didn't feel safe without having his weapon with him. He felt safer in Baghdad

because he could carry a gun there."

Still, the family is "more scared" about him being there than he is, said Nicole.

"Ninety percent of Iraqis are happy we're there," his mother quoted him as saying. "He's made friends there that help them. He said they're real generous and love the Americans."

Although opportunities to involve himself in Tribal activities were few in Huntington Beach, Nicole recalls an Indian conference that took place when Estrada was in high school. "Erik was the rep for our Tribe," she said. "He's a very shining, personal personality. He's very bright. He has a lot of friends. He's one of those guys that you really remember."

The family had an email from Estrada following a recent bombing at the U.S. Administrator's compound in Baghdad. "The bombings shook his apartment but he and his unit were ok," said Debbie.

Though he has told family members that he is lonely over there, "he feels very confident that he is doing the right thing. He really takes pride with the people he is helping over there," said Nicole. ■



Erik Estrada



Photos by Toby McClary

Respected Elder — A retirement party was held for Tribal Elder Kenneth Lafferty (above left) at the Community Center on Friday, January 16. Lafferty, shown with fellow security guard Juan Sifuentes, is retiring after four years of patrolling with ProStar Security. Before that he was a diesel mechanic and served in the Marine Corps. He is married to Darlene Lafferty and lives in the Elders' Housing in Grand Ronde. Lafferty wishes to thank all those who came to his retirement, saying he appreciated it greatly. Now that he's retired he plans "to do a little more traveling and a lot more hunting and fishing."