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HELPING HAND - LeAnn Rimes, Cowboys team up to aid charity

By Jessica Deleon
Star-Telegram Staff Writer

IRVING - When LeAnn Rimes performs at the Dallas Cowboys football game on Thanksgiving, she'll be singing for people like Joie Ann Rivera.

Rivera, 20, of Garland pays just \$25 a week for her 18-month-old daughter Amber's child care, which is subsidized by the Salvation Army.

Rimes will perform at the 2002 National Kettle Kickoff, the extravaganza during the Cowboys' football game that launches the Salvation Army's fund-raising campaign. At a news conference Tuesday in Irving, officials touted the halftime show's ability to combine entertainment and people's interest in sports to raise awareness of the charitable organization and its mission.

"What you can do is raise literally millions and millions of dollars that would have otherwise stayed in people's pockets," Cowboys owner Jerry Jones said.

In 2001, donations placed in the group's signature red kettles topped \$91 million. And as a recipient of the Salvation Army's services, Rivera said she is grateful. By using subsidized day care, she can focus on her classes for court reporting and not have to work full time.

"If it wasn't for them," she said, "I wouldn't be able to go to school."

Cases like hers are becoming more common. The Salvation Army -- which assists victims of disaster, pays for children's medical care and camp fees, and provides job referrals -- has experienced a drop in donations because of the slumping economy and the impact of the Sept. 11 attacks.

The organization saw contributions of \$1.4 billion in 2001, which was down from the previous year. Lt. Col. Tom Jones, director of national community relations and development, said he didn't know how much would be raised this year.

"It's not easy," he said. "But the Army is still helping people."

Jones said more people are asking for help because of the weak economy. Recipients use the services of the Salvation Army to help them pay for rent, utilities and housing. In 2001, the Salvation Army served 38 million people -- a record for the organization and 1.2 million more requests than the previous year, officials said.

In past years, one of the people it helped was a young Emmitt Smith, who got his first handoff on a Salvation Army Peewee team in Pensacola, Fla., Jerry Jones said.

The campaign kickoff was at the Gene and Jerry Jones Family Center for Children, near Grauwylar and Britain roads.

The Jones family brought the idea for the Thanksgiving halftime show to the 137-year-old charity and to television executives six years ago. It will be aired nationally Nov. 28 on the Fox television network.

Rimes will perform Life Goes On, her latest single, and The Safest Place. Rivera's daughter, Amber, was to be photographed with Rimes, the Jones family and Cowboys quarterbacks Chad Hutchinson and Clint Stoerner, but Amber cried.

Rivera didn't mind. She said she's excited about the show.

"It's awesome," she said.