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HEADLINE: Community works together to stage fantasy wedding

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FALLBROOK -- Brenda Rausch and William "Mac" McLemore met, fell in love and got engaged.

The next step wasn't that easy.

The couple were strapped for money and time to plan the wedding they wanted.

The center of their world is Bryan, McLemore's 6-year-old son from his first marriage. The youngster has Angelman Syndrome, a condition characterized by physical and developmental delays and seizures.

Much of their time is spent caring for him and taking him to his medical appointments.

"I picked out my wedding dress. That was about it," Rausch said.

Now a whole village has come together to make the couple's wish come true.

McLemore, 37, a Marine Corps master sergeant and Gulf War veteran, and Rausch, 26, are the recipients of this year's Fallbrook Fantasy Wedding, a three-year tradition in which area businesses, the chamber of commerce and other groups come together to give a military couple a wedding complete with flowers, music and a catered dinner.

McLemore and Rausch, who got the news of their selection on Valentine's Day, were stunned to be chosen from a pool of five finalists.

"It was like winning the lottery," McLemore said. "I buy lots of tickets all the time and have never won."

He met Rausch in 2002, soon after he was transferred from Maryland to Oahu.

"She's really interesting, fun, always laughing. That's one of the best things about her," he said.

When he was transferred to Camp Pendleton, the two maintained a long-distance relationship.

A year later, McLemore, who has custody of his son, returned to Oahu for a month-long class in Russian.

When he arrived, the child-care arrangements he had made for Bryan fell through.

Desperate, he called on Rausch, who worked nights, to care for his son during the day.

Rausch agreed.

While the experience left her exhausted, it drew her close to Bryan. And she saw McLemore's devotion to his son.

"He was very affectionate, very loving. The kid was the center of his world. It really helped me sort through my feelings," she said.

Before he returned to Camp Pendleton, McLemore proposed to Rausch on one of Oahu's scenic beaches.

It was not under the best of circumstances, he recalled.

Rausch, who had little inkling of what was to come, was a little annoyed that she would be late to work. Bryan was cranky.

Still, when McLemore got down on his knees and proposed, her mind was clear.

"I wasn't expecting it at all," she said. "I was kind of overwhelmed. But I couldn't imagine saying, 'No.'"

GRAPHIC: 1 PIC; **CAPTIONS:** Brenda Rausch (left) and William McLemore were selected to be the winners of this year's Fallbrook Fantasy Wedding.; **PHOTOBY:** Eduardo Contreras / Union-Tribune