Military relations

For Jaramillos, serving country a family affair

By Peter Madrid

ERIKA JARAMILLO AND HER SISTER, ANNIE, CAN boast that they've been around the world.

OK, let's be honest. Their travel destinations are not exactly where two twentysomething Latinas would prefer to visit. That is unless Uncle Sam is picking up the tab.

Meet Staff Sgt. Erika Jaramillo and Staff Sgt. Annie Jaramillo. Both are firefighters with the Arizona Air National Guard's 162nd Fighter Wing unit based in Tucson. Let's not forget dad. That would be Chief Master Sgt. Bobby Jaramillo.

"Like anything else in life, what you put into your military experience is what you're going to get out of it," says Erika, 28, who has been a member of the Guard for almost eight years. "This is the best experience possible."

The sisters' choice to follow in dad's footsteps comes as no surprise. Chief Master Sgt. Jaramillo joined the 162nd Fighter Wing in 1976 after serving in the Navy Reserve. He now serves at Arizona Joint Force Headquarters in Phoenix.

Left to right, Staff Sgt. Erika Jaramillo; Chief Master Sgt. Bobby Jaramillo; and Staff Sgt. Annie Jaramillo.

Erika, an accomplished athlete when she was in high school, earned her bachelor's degree in math from Northern Arizona University in 2004. She's a certified teacher and works as a substitute on her days off from the Guard. She also helps with the Sunnyside High School girls volleyball team.

Annie, 26, has seven years total in the military, but took some time off to raise her three children. She has been with the Guard now full-time since 2007.

"I'm very proud of both of them," Chief Master Sgt. Jaramillo says. "The true feeling of being a father ... I think when it hits home ... Is when they deploy then come home from the Middle East. ... Thoughts of them not coming back. ... They're our children."

Erika served a four-month stint in Iraq as a firefighter, hospital worker and even took time to teach math to U.S. airmen. She also was deployed to the U.S. South when Hurricane Katrina struck. Annie spent five months in Kuwait in 2006.

How did each sister prepare for deployment?

"I tried to look at it in the most positive way even before (deploying)," Erika says. "My mindset was do the best I could do. It's an unfortunate situation. Once I got over there, I was as involved as possible. Any time that I had off, I made sure I was busy."

Says Annie: "I also looked at it in a positive way, like our dad has taught us to do. It was a positive experience for me. One stepping stone in my life. I'd do it again in a heartbeat if asked to. You can't explain it to others. And it makes you appreciate what you do have here in the United States."

"Family and community first" dominate the way these siblings and dad approach their duty in the Guard. Chief Master Sgt. Jaramillo, an immigrant from Mexico, also views the military as an opportunity for Latinos and Latinas.

"Citizen solider. It's only made me a better person," says Annie. "Leadership is a great direction to take in life. I learned from it. It has been right in every way possible in my life."

Adds Chief Master Sgt. Jaramillo: "It's a great way for young men and women to become part of this wonderful country. There are no barriers. It offers great opportunities. There are no limitations."

There are also no limitations when it comes to the Jaramillos giving back to the community.

"The Guard is just one big part of my family," Erika says.