



Soldiers and staff from the medical center at Bagram Air Force Base in Afghanistan look on as a wounded soldier (far left) uses a netbook equipped with Skype to speak with his family in the United States. Bishop Vath Assembly in Birmingham, Ala., worked with 10 K of C units to purchase 30 netbooks for soldiers at the base recovering from combat-related injuries.



Jerry Ladnier of Yorktown (Va.) Council 7469 serves a pulled pork sandwich and baked beans at the K of C tent during the Ride 2 Recovery Memorial Challenge. More than 200 injured veterans and support staff participated in the seven-day, 350-mile bike ride from Arlington to Virginia Beach. Father James Lee Rizer Council 6828 in Williamsburg and Father John P. Washington Assembly in Yorktown, along with other area K of C units, provided support during the event, including food for participants and spectators.

Donation for Veterans

St. Cecilia Council 14368 in DeMotte, Ind., donated \$500 and a new Blu-ray Disc player to the Indiana Veterans' Home in West Lafayette.

Food Drive

St. Katharine Drexel Council 12868 in Egg Harbor Township, N.J., and Rev. Dr. John T. Sheehan Assembly in Atlantic City worked with the Yellow Ribbon Club to collect approximately 1,200 pounds of food for U.S. troops serving overseas. Volunteers handed out lists to customers at an area grocery store, collecting enough donations to assemble 38 care packages.

Chaplain Assistance Program

Father Louis A. Williamson Council 8123 in Hartsville, S.C., began a program to assist military chaplains in Iraq and Afghanistan. By working with the Archdiocese for the Military Services, USA, the council raised funds to purchase altar linens, prayer books and a Stations of the Cross set for Catholic priests serving on the front lines.

Operation Stand Down

Valle de Oro Council 9332 in Spring Valley, Calif., and St. Luke Council 10512 in El Cajon delivered 5.5 tons of drinking water to Operation Stand Down in San Diego. Held annually for the last 24 years, Operation Stand Down offers homeless veterans the chance to receive medical and dental services, free clothing and haircuts, consultations on social security and other services, and a place to eat and sleep for the weekend. More than 1,000 veterans, many suffering post-traumatic stress disorder, attended the event.

Film Screening

St. Joseph Council 443 in New York co-sponsored an appreciation night for veterans with American Legion Post #581 and the Catholic War Veterans of the Bronx. The night included a special screening of *Chosin*, a documentary about the Chosin Reservoir Campaign during the Korean War, and an ice cream social. The event raised nearly \$1,000 for the Wounded Warrior Project and the James J. Peters VA Medical Center.

Blankets for Veterans

Pope John XXIII Assembly in Livonia, Mich., donated 24 lap blankets to Michigan Fourth Degree District #1 for distribution to veterans at the John D. Dingell VA Medical Center in Detroit. The blankets were knitted by women incarcerated at the Women's Huron Valley Correctional Facility and donated with assistance from Dennis Lipski, the assembly's prison ministry coordinator.

Sundries for Soldiers

Our Lady of Czestochowa Assembly in Luzerne, Pa., donated personal items and a variety of games to G Company of the Pennsylvania National Guard, which is stationed at the 109th Field Artillery in Wilkes-Barre and is due for imminent deployment.

Helping Homeless Vets

Father Harry T. Hayes Assembly in Nampa, Idaho, donated \$500 to the Boise Rescue Mission to help homeless veterans, either with free meals or through the mission's transitional program.



'It Gives Them a Sense of the World'

Catholic school students form special bond with soldiers serving overseas

by John Shaughnessy

Editor's Note: This article originally appeared in the March 25 issue of The Criterion (Archdiocese of Indianapolis) and is reprinted here with permission.

Fifth-grade teacher Rena Becher knows that there are moments in life when a simple gesture that says "I'm thinking of you" can forge an immediate bond between people.

As proof, she refers to the special thank-you letters that American soldiers serving overseas have sent to her students at St. Simon the Apostle School in Indianapolis. She mentions how quiet her students become when she reads them one of the letters, such as this one from a soldier serving in Afghanistan who received a care package that the children had helped to make:

"Sitting in our small slice of heaven in Afghanistan, it started to be a looming notion that the holidays were all just going to meld into our daily routine," the soldier wrote. "When our chaplain came down with your packages, though, it moved me. Many days I catch flashes of news during chow and see such a distaste for this war that it makes me feel more than a little dissension toward us soldiers that have to fight it.

"However, the packages we received gave me renewed faith and a happiness that I truly haven't felt since I was a child. The gifts you sent us aren't of candy, but of love and hope, which are truly what we needed. I could never tell you how much it means to us."

The soldier signed his name under the words, "From the bottom of my heart, my deepest regards."

This special connection between students in Indianapolis and soldiers in Iraq, Afghanistan, Kuwait, Bosnia and other parts of the world has been a key part of the faith-based life lessons at St. Simon School for more than six years. It's a connection that can also be found at other archdiocesan schools, including those at St. Luke the Evangelist, St. Matthew the Apostle, St. Monica and St. Pius X parishes, all in Indianapolis.

"It gives them a sense of the world beyond St. Simon," Becher said. "We're involved in



Indiana National Guard soldiers, from left, Pam Moody, Tahnee Azure and Paulette Riehl show their delight in receiving Christmas care packages while serving in Afghanistan. Students from Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Indianapolis collect candy, toiletries and stuffed animals that are sent in care packages to the soldiers several times each year.

this because it's a way of giving to others, which God wants us to do. I don't look at it just from a patriotic standpoint, but from a religious standpoint, too. This is our faith. This is a service we can do."

The care package project is undertaken by fifth-grade students at St. Simon School because that is the year when students study American history — and the soldiers fighting in wars today are part of that history. It is also a project that is touched by fun and joy, as led by the three fifth-grade teachers at St. Simon School: Becher, Mary Beth Keiser and Laura Legault.

At Halloween, Keiser challenged her students to donate their excess candy from trick-or-treating. As a result, 77 students contributed more than 800 pounds of candy.

"It was a really big deal in our class," recalled John Morrissey, who was a student in Keiser's class at the time. "We all crowded around as our boxes of candy were weighed.

I actually gave all of my candy, except for a piece or two."

At Christmas, the children write cards, collect toiletries ranging from lip balm to foot powder, and decorate the boxes for their gifts. In March, they collect donated Girl Scout cookies for the soldiers.

"I just like helping the soldiers," said Susanna Tsueda, who brought in a large quantity of Girl Scout cookies. "And I like it that they send back notes for the things we send."

In addition, the students' reactions continually touch their teachers.

"They really understand that it's an amazing thing that they're helping people they're never going to meet," Legault said. "And we're grateful to the soldiers because they're serving our country, and they've volunteered to do that."

In short, the efforts by the children shows them that they're part of something bigger than themselves.



The collections at St. Simon School began as part of a major project that has been led for the past eight years by Diane Spaulding of Indianapolis.

When the United States began combat operations in Iraq in March 2003, Spaulding joined an effort by the Salvation Army to send care packages to American soldiers who deployed.

After the Salvation Army initiative ended a few months later, Spaulding faced a crossroads moment as she walked through the Hillcrest Country Club in Indianapolis, where she is a member, and saw a man crying. When she approached the man, a maintenance worker, he explained that his son, who had a wife and child, was being deployed to Iraq. After asking what she could do to help, Spaulding and her husband began to brainstorm.

Finally, Spaulding decided to continue the care package program with the help of friends and country club members, a group that became known as the Hillcrest Guardian Angels.

"The first soldiers were members of the Indiana National Guard out of Terre Haute," Spaulding said. "They were there for 18 months. We would get names from other people, too. We shipped 1,000 boxes for Christmas in 2004. By then, I realized we needed help."

St. Simon School became involved through the efforts of two women whose children have attended the school. Since then, school students and staff, as well as parents, have poured their hearts into the program.

"That school has been the most wonderful benefactor to our soldiers," Spaulding said. "Whatever we ask them, they are willing to do."

That willingness leads to a story that makes Spaulding laugh every time she shares it: "A soldier wrote a [thank-you letter] that said, 'Thank you for the toothbrushes. I'm using one to brush my teeth and one to clean the sand out of my gun.' The boys at the school went crazy with that. They said, 'We need to get more toothbrushes!'"

In turn, the school hosted a toothbrush collection in 2005 with a goal of 125 toothbrushes.

Spaulding continued, "The week before Thanksgiving, a teacher called and said, 'We have 1,992 toothbrushes. The boys said they didn't want those guns to jam.' When we



[Top] Students Susanna Tsueda and John Morrissey display posters that encourage fellow students at St. Simon the Apostle School in Indianapolis to collect candy, cookies and gifts for U.S. soldiers serving overseas. [Left] Students at St. Simon donated their Halloween candy for a shipment of care packages. Seventy-seven students donated more than 800 pounds of candy.

packed the boxes in the first week of December, we had 4,000 toothbrushes."

The response was similar from St. Matthew School when American soldiers overseas requested stuffed animals. The soldiers give the stuffed animals to children in the countries where they serve as a way of showing they care about the people in those countries. St. Matthew students went into their rooms and closets and collected about 3,000 stuffed animals one Christmas.

"What big hearts they have," Spaulding said of the children. "I'm just so proud of them."

The caring continues at St. Simon School, where teachers raised about \$800 to help offset the considerable shipping charges involved in mailing boxes around the world.

"It's a service project with faith, and a service project with heart," said Legault. "It means the world to us." ♦

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Merry Christmas to All Men and Women in the Armed Forces

The communications staff at the Knights of Columbus would like to wish all of the men and women serving in the armed forces a safe and merry Christmas. In the words of Supreme Knight Carl A. Anderson, "It is by your actions that freedom is preserved and extended." Knights of Columbus around the world continue to pray for peace and for your safe return.