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Frank Gray

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Frank Gray writes about area people and issues and what sometimes happens when the two become entangled. His column is published Tuesdays, Thursdays and Sundays in The Journal Gazette and on journalgazette.net. With the newspaper since 1982, Gray has also been a reporter, assistant metro editor and business editor.



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aiding GIs

Hoagland man is candidate for Microsoft service award

Frank Gray

In early 2003, Sgt. Brian Horn of Maryland parachuted into northern Iraq, one of 1,000 soldiers who spearheaded the invasion of that country.

Even Horn's father, Marty, a career soldier who has retired from the Army, didn't fathom what the conditions would be like for his son. Months after they entered the country, Horn learned the entire force of airborne soldiers was still sleeping on the bare ground.

Trying to help, Marty Horn and his wife had sent generous care packages filled with creature comforts to their son. But one day during a brief phone conversation from Iraq, their son asked for more.

The parents were a little baffled. Hadn't they been sending enough?

Well, many soldiers didn't get much mail, their son told them. He was sharing what he had with them.

Horn, being a former soldier, knew exactly what he was talking about. Some soldiers do seem to be forgotten.

So Horn sent e-mails to everyone he knew, asking them to send care packages to their son, and under his name to write, "any soldier," a signal it was for the other soldiers in his group.

But the needs of soldiers were changing day by day, so rather than send out dozens of new e-mails every day, Horn set up a Web site where friends could find an updated list of what soldiers wanted.

Call that a mistake, call it luck, call it fate, but the Web site didn't go unnoticed. Within days, people from around the world had stumbled across it and started asking to help.

Horn quickly realized what he had started. People all over wanted to help, but he couldn't have them all send packages to his son. What, he reasoned, if he could find other soldiers to serve as contacts, just like his son?

So in January 2004, he revamped his Web site and started doing the math. What if by the end of the year he could find 50 soldiers to serve as contacts. Hundreds, maybe thousands of soldiers could get assistance.

Let's just say Horn's idea was a lot bigger than he realized. Within a year, a thousand soldiers had stepped forward to be contacts, and people all over the world were responding.

That simple Web site to keep friends updated has grown into something larger than Horn even imagined. He had to incorporate his operation, which operates under www.anysoldier.com, forming a non-profit, and appoint a board of directors, which includes other soldiers, lawyers and activists.

Today, Horn, who moved to Hoagland about a year ago, runs anysoldier.com from his home, working up to 70 hours a week. "I get up at 4 or 5 a.m. and work until I pass out at night, eight days a week," he says.

Today, nearly 4,000 soldiers have become contacts, and they have shared the aid with nearly 1 million other soldiers.



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The site also includes requests directly from soldiers, explaining what they need and, just as important, what they don't need, and visitors who want to help can choose the soldier they want to help.

Then, just a few days ago, Horn learned that Microsoft, in partnership with the USO, had nominated him for the Microsoft Above and Beyond Awards, which recognize contributions of the military community to brighten the lives of U.S. troops throughout the world.

Horn, who has worked on this project for nearly four years, was nominated in the outstanding effort category.

The award will be presented in New York on Nov. 12.

The catch is that voting is taking place on the Internet, on Microsoft's Web site – and voting ended Monday. So if you want to vote for Horn, you missed your chance.

It doesn't trouble Horn, though. "Things like this happen," he says. "I've been nominated for awards. I've won some and not others."

But it doesn't matter. "If it leads someone to my Web site, good," he says. That's what it's really all about.

The Web site, by the way, has expanded into a sprawling site with plenty of instructions, lists of soldiers with specific requests, new sections for any sailor, any Marine, any Coast Guard member, and any airman.

There are rules. Nothing can be shipped that isn't in a factory sealed bag. Sorry, no home-cooked anything is permitted.

The system isn't flawless. "The strength is, we're dealing with good people," Horn says. "The weakness is, we're dealing with people." Things will go wrong. Things will be shipped to the wrong place. Things will get lost. People will ship things that soldiers don't need.

That's bound to happen.

Instead, look at the hundreds of thousands of things that have worked.

If Horn wins the award, though, he won't be able to accept it.

"I was previously invited to a large fundraiser in California on Nov. 12. I'm committed to going to that."

If he does win, his wife will go. "She's thrilled," and she's from New York.

Frank Gray has held positions as a reporter and editor at The Journal Gazette since 1982, and has been writing a column on local issues since 1998. His column is published Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday. He can be reached by phone at 461-8376; by fax at 461-8893; or e-mail at fgray@jg.net.