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Local News

Area students send kites to children in Afghanistan

By DIANE WETZEL, The North Platte Telegraph
05/28/2006

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STAPLETON - Students in religious education classes at St. John the Evangelist Catholic Church in Stapleton recently collected enough money to purchase 90 kites to send to children in Afghanistan. The students were participating in "Kites 4 Kids," a program created by Lt. Col Richard Peterson from Toledo, Ohio, who is stationed in Bagram, Afghanistan, with the 455th Expeditionary Logistics Readiness Squadron.

Kite flying was a beloved national pastime in Afghanistan prior to Taliban rule. But, during the years when the Taliban was in power, kite flying was banned, and children caught flying kites were beaten.

Peterson posted his plea for funds on AnyAirman.com. The Web site is an offshoot of Any Soldier.com, which features e-mails from military personnel regarding the kind of support needed in the field.

"Just yesterday I was driving by a village and watched many children run through mine fields, some missing their limbs, but they have nowhere else to kick a soccer ball or throw rocks," Peterson wrote.

Jim Chapman of Stapleton saw Peterson's post on the site.

"I was looking for addresses to send books," Chapman said.

Chapman and his wife Marie began sending books to soldiers stationed overseas in 2004. The book effort resulted in thousands of pounds of reading material donated and shipped as area communities joined in the project.

"Children don't have any place to play," Chapman said. "So for our next project, I wanted to help every kid in the village have a kite," Chapman said.

The Chapmans sent off 20 kites, then Marie, who is director of Religious Education at St. John's, told the students about Peterson's project.

"They brought in cans, decorated them, and put in public places in Stapleton," Marie said. "They raised enough money to purchase 90 kites."

In April, Peterson wrote that members of his squadron were not allowed off the base.

"March and April are rainy months when Afghanistan experiences heavy flooding," Peterson wrote.

"Once the snow melts, the Taliban come out of the mountains and attack. I know the news contains

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little of what is going on here since Iraq is center stage.

"Having support of friends like you great Americans is why we are here," Peterson said, "to protect and serve you. That is what we signed up to do."

Being confined to base hasn't stopped squad members from achieving their mission of delivering toys and kites to Afghan children.

"Every Sunday local Afghan women and children visit the Egyptian Hospital for Medical Care," Peterson said. "This past Sunday, more than 100 women and children received a little extra in addition to medical care."

Peterson had the idea of giving out kites after reading "The Kite Runner," a book that provides a glimpse into Afghan life from 1970 through the Taliban reign.

"We are attempting to give back to the community and let them we know and respect their tradition of flying kites," Peterson wrote. "Kites might bring them some salvation."

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