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News

Students spark tremendous response in creating care packages for soldiers

By Mary Nusbaum, Assistant Editor

05/20/2005

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 SHAMOKIN — It started out as a fairly small-scale community service project. But in this case, good things came in fairly large packages — and getting larger all the time. The Student Government Association at the Northumberland Regional Center (NRC) of Luzerne County Community College (LCCC) thought it might be nice to get together a “care package” for a soldier serving overseas, according to Laura Siko, NRC daytime administrator/adviser.

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“One of our students, Amy Dilliplane, is a veteran herself, and it was she who brought the Web site Anysoldier.com to our attention,” Siko said.

Anysoldier.com is an Internet forum on which soldiers can post their requests for any items civilians back home wish to send. The brainchild and labor of love of Sgt. Brian Horn of La Plata, Md., and a consortium of military families, Anysoldier.com now has thousands of participating soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines.

Horn’s mother, herself a veteran, has also set up TreatAnySoldier.com, a Web site where donors can buy an already prepared package to send. But many who have felt moved to gather items together say there’s no satisfaction quite like doing the work oneself, as the students of NRC discovered.

The students in instructor Becky Deitrick’s First-Year Experience class began soliciting donations, publicizing their cause and seeking help from local schools and groups, according to Siko.

Pretty soon, the students’ hard work began paying off. Word started getting around, and other businesses and individuals wanted to get involved. Donations started pouring in from area businesses and other organizations.

Along with monetary donations from groups like the newly formed student government at Northumberland County Area Vocational-Technical School, which contributed \$200 to cover the cost of shipping, a great deal of goods like nonperishable food and toiletries has also been collected. Siko said from an initial goal of collecting 10 boxes, a total of 50 is now anticipated, to be shipped off around the first of June.

“Our original goal was fairly small,” Siko said. “We don’t have a lot of manpower. But the response from businesses and students has been overwhelming.”

Other groups contributed their time and effort in their own unique ways. Mount Carmel Head Start children created art projects for the troops; students at Shamokin Area High School conducted a letter-writing campaign; and seniors at the Northumberland County

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Adult Day Care made crafts and wrote letters as well.

"I really can't say enough about the students' hard work on this," Siko said. She said the core group of Brittany Shervinski, Darlene Walter, Jen Shannon, Kim Olearnick, Collette Brandt and Dilliplane were the chief organizers. NRC has been a primary source of donations, as has the Pennsylvania CareerLink and Arts Center, which, like NRC, is headquartered in the Northumberland County Career and Arts Center at Eighth and Arch streets.

Siko, who has served in her position as adviser for nearly a year, doesn't have any relatives currently serving in the armed forces, but said her father and many uncles were Vietnam veterans.

What made her want to help get such a project going? "I just thought it was a really great program," she said. "I looked over the Web site — it's for soldiers who don't get enough support — and I liked how it was geared toward soldiers who might need a boost."

Coincidentally, The News-Item staff also put together a box for a soldier serving in a forward operating base near Ramadi, Iraq, though its efforts were not coordinated with Siko's.

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"I don't see why not," she said. "If more people are interested, it could be an ongoing thing. I hope that's what will happen."

Siko's not shy about contacting area media and heads of agencies to get the word out on the NRC students' project, in the hopes of generating as much enthusiasm and participation as possible.

And, though she plays a pivotal role in coordinating much of the effort, she assigns all the credit to the students who've done so much hard work in making the troops' duty a little easier.

"The students have worked very, very hard," she said. "It's been a great effort."

Anyone seeking information can contact Siko at lsiko@luzerne.edu. Though a collection site has been set up at the career and arts center, potential donors should remember the group has set a June 1 deadline. However, as Siko said, anyone can "adopt" a soldier through Anysoldier.com, if he or she doesn't know anyone who's serving overseas personally. A search on the Internet yields many results, but many family members who run similar sites warn potential donors to be wary of scams. A legitimate organization will clearly state its military contacts.

Still, the red tape is fairly minimal — one only needs to be mindful of properly filling out customs forms, and to pack sensibly — but the effort can pay large dividends in brightening the day for a serviceman or -woman. Siko thinks so, anyway.

"We feel really good about what we've accomplished so far," Siko said. "We're very excited that we can get 50 boxes out and touch 50 soldiers' lives."

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