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'Town Hall Gang' supports troops

Sunday, September 24, 2006

BY JONATHAN SHUGARTS

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WASHINGTON, Conn. -- For more than a year, a group dubbing itself the Town Hall Gang has spent Friday afternoons assembling care packages for soldiers overseas.

The gang -- Barbara Johnson, the town assessor and her assistant Denise Arturi along with Sheila M. Anson, the town clerk and residents and employees in Town Hall -- have been donating time and goods.

The spark for the idea came when Johnson overheard a fellow co-worker talking about supporting U.S. troops overseas.

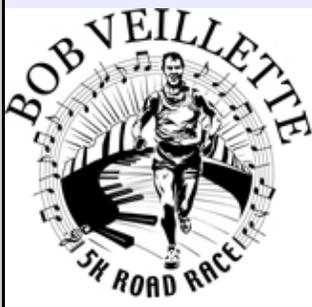
"Well, we support the troops by wearing red on Friday. Somebody said to me, how does that support the troops?" Johnson said. Afterwards, Johnson decided she was going to do more than wear red. She and the gang decided to send troops with the items they needed that are beyond the basic necessities provided by the military.

A typical package consists of sealed snacks such as granola bars and potato chips, powdered juice drinks and toiletries such as shaving cream and toilet paper.

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One of the most popular requests is for beef jerky because it stays fairly fresh and it's light, which can be factor when a soldier is lugging more than a 100 pounds of gear in the desert heat.

The gang has received certificates of appreciation from the military and occasionally gets thank you letters from the troops. "To receive packages and kind words from some people we don't know, lets us know we are not fighting over here in vain. It gives us that little push to go on, on those days when we feel like it is no use in us being here," a letter from Anthony del Pino, a soldier in Iraq, reads.

Since September 2005, the group has sent 106 packages to troops overseas.

The group reviews Anysoldier.com -- a Web site listing soldiers in all branches of the armed services who are requesting items -- for names of soldiers to send to. If the group hears from local residents of a soldier in need, they add them to their list.

The gang relies on donated food stuffs and toiletries to assemble the packages and for postage which has cost about \$1,300 so far, but has been supplemented by the local Lions Club.

During the donation process the group has gotten special requests, such as protein powder, a dictionary and sporting equipment. One group of soldiers also requested clothing from the group to help set up an orphanage in Iraq.

Johnson said she and her fellow members of the gang would keep sending the packages as long as they were able.

"It would be wonderful if there was no reason to send it," Johnson said.

People who know of soldiers overseas who need items can contact the Town Hall Gang at (860) 868-0398.

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