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Student meets military pen-pal

By Maribeth Holtz

Sturgis Journal

MENDON — Twelve-year-old Taylor Batten stood in the principal's office Thursday, anxiously looking out the window.

Her little body — smaller than most girls her age — trembled in excitement.

Her mother stood by, hoping to see the special guest, too. Whenever Taylor was asked a question, she would answer it politely and then quickly look out the window again, waiting.

Dressed in camouflage, Taylor waited to meet her pen pal she had been writing to for eight months — an army specialist who had been stationed in Iraq.

Taylor said that when she heard B.J. Gallagher, 20, was coming to have lunch with her, she said, "Oh-ho, yeah."

She said words couldn't describe how she felt.

This is the first time she has met one of the many military personnel to whom she has been writing.

Finally, a car pulled up. B.J. and his mother, Patti, both of Kalamazoo, walked into the doors of Mendon Middle/High School and Taylor ran to jump into B.J.'s arms.

All smiles, Taylor was proud to show off her soldier to her friends standing nearby.

"Told you he was hot!" she said.

A long road

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Taylor hasn't always been all smiles. She has Turner syndrome, a chromosomal condition that made her have heart surgery when she was 6 months old and makes her more prone to illnesses and chronic fatigue. She has regular sinus surgery and deals with pain.

Her mother, Cathy said, "What would normally knock our socks off, she thinks is normal."

Taylor was misdiagnosed for 10 years before being diagnosed at Mayo Clinic. Cathy said the road has been hard, but what has gotten Taylor through has been writing to military personnel overseas.

Cathy said her daughter has always been infatuated with the military, even when she was just beginning to walk, she would see a man in a uniform and salute him.

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About a year ago, Taylor started writing to soldiers and sending care packages through www.anysoldier.com. Soon she struck up a friendship with a Marine, who sent her a flag that was flown over Iraq on a mission in honor of her.

"As she pulled the flag out, she held it up to her heart and she just cried," Cathy said. "That fighting spirit just grew by leaps and bounds."

Taylor was made an "honorary Marine" and was told how special she was for caring



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for soldiers. She was nicknamed "Mighty Mite" and has since not worried about her height nor cried about her illness.

"It has been a life-altering moment for not just her, but for all of us," Cathy said. "... as the Marine said, she is an American warrior."

A new friendship

Taylor began writing to B.J. when she met his mother at a Kalamazoo Kings baseball game. Patti was collecting baseball equipment to send to soldiers and children in Iraq. She started collecting them because B.J. missed playing baseball and he didn't care for the duct-taped towel and rock he was using instead of a mitt and ball.

Taylor donated equipment to Patti's organization, Operation America's Past Time. She then sat with Patti and asked her if she could write to her son.

"Tears just streamed," Patti said. "We were crying, we were hugging... it's amazing how close you can bond in a heartbeat, in an instant."

Since then, Taylor and B.J. have been exchanging letters and e-mails. Patti said B.J. asks about Taylor a lot whenever he talks to her.

Moving forward

Taylor, B.J., their mothers, and school principal Jay Peterson shared a McDonald's lunch together in the school cafeteria. Ironically, Peterson had B.J. as a student when he taught in Kalamazoo. He said he wasn't at all surprised when he heard that B.J. wanted to meet Taylor because the Gallagher family is so giving.

B.J., a 2004 graduate of Kalamazoo Central High School, said he is thankful for Taylor's support.

He said she gives him motivation and it's fun to get letters from the people he's fighting for.

He thinks Taylor's pretty special and is very mature for her age.

B.J. and Taylor's friendship has spread to others as well. Tanner, Taylor's little brother, helped recruit his classmates to send B.J.'s unit Christmas cards. B.J. visited Tanner's class after his lunch with Taylor.

Tighter bonds

Patti and Cathy have gained a friendship, too, and lean on each other for support.

They'll need that support on March 10, when B.J. heads back to Iraq and Taylor has another surgery.

Taylor encourages her classmates and friends to send letters to soldiers.

"It's the right thing to do because they need inspiration, motivation and support," Taylor said.

Patti said Taylor is an inspiration to her.

"Some days, she's what keeps me going," she said.

Maribeth Holtz is a staff writer for the Journal. Contact her at holtz@sturgisjournal.com.

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