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Moe's Collects Items for Soldiers Overseas

Sending snacks, DVDs, books, CDs, etc. in care packages

By Bonnie Hobbs

December 14, 2006

Customers entering Moe's Southwest Grill in Chantilly are greeted with a hearty shout of "Welcome to Moe's!" But now, besides enjoying the tasty food and warm welcome, Moe's customers may also help brighten the holidays for soldiers stationed in Iraq, Afghanistan and other remote outposts.

That's because all five, Northern Virginia Moe's are participating in the Any Soldier Inc. program to send care packages to American servicemen and women overseas. People wishing to donate items for the packages simply bring them to Moe's and drop them in the gift-wrapped collection box.

"Each soldier gets five to 10 items ranging from CDs and magazines to treats like M&Ms," said Frank Maresca, owner of the Moe's restaurants in Chantilly and South Riding.

"Each box has a different theme – entertainment, goodies and treats, and toiletries and personal-care items."

Everything should be unwrapped and – although food and toiletry items obviously should be new – books, magazines, CDs and DVDs may be gently used. Community teams will then assemble these gifts into care packages, and Moe's will cover the cost of all supplies, plus shipping costs for distribution to service members in war zones.

The collection began Dec. 1 and will continue through Saturday, Dec. 23. And the cool thing about the Any Soldier Inc. program is that the men and women who'll receive the gifts are people who'd, otherwise, receive nothing.

"It's a very selfless thing," explained Maresca. "The soldiers we send these packages to aren't the actual, final recipients of them. They already get packages, and that's why we have their addresses."

"[Earlier], they've gone on the anysoldier.com Web site and volunteered to receive packages for their buddies who won't be getting anything," continued Maresca. And in the 'attention' line on the package's address, it'll say, 'Any Soldier,' and they'll know to pass it on."

ANY SOLDIER INC. was founded in August 2003 by Army Sgt. Brian Horn, of LaPlata, Md., an infantry soldier who served in both Iraq and Afghanistan (and is now safely home). Concerned about his soldiers who weren't getting mail, he told people back home that, if they'd send packages to him addressed to "Attn: Any Soldier," he'd distribute them to these soldiers. But what began as one man's effort to bring a little joy into some lonely soldiers' lives yielded such an overwhelming response that it led to the creation of a nationwide organization benefiting any member of any branch of the service in harm's way.

"My wife and I heard about it, a couple years ago, and did a couple care packages, ourselves," said Maresca. "And now that we have a couple Moe's, we're using them as a platform to do it on a larger scale."

When Maresca told the Moe's organization about the program, it eagerly endorsed it. So now, people wishing to contribute items for the packages may bring them to the Moe's Southwest Grills in Chantilly, South Riding, Leesburg, Falls Church and Mount Vernon. A list of recommended items may be found at www.welcome2moes.net.



Margie Fitzgerald and her son Cole at the Chantilly location of Moe's Southwest Grill donate items for care packages being sent to soldiers overseas.

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The brand names listed are only suggestions; any brands may be purchased. However, Gatorade should be contributed as packets of powdered drink mix, rather than in bottles. And no aerosol containers are accepted. But simple things such as honey-roasted peanuts, chocolate chip cookies, shampoo and DVDs make a huge difference to people stationed in a foreign land and longing for a little bit of home.

The collection box in the Chantilly Moe's is three feet high and, said Maresca, "We've already had to empty it once. It's great to see this kind of response."

He also noted that various student groups from nearby Westfield High are helping with the effort and "they're even collecting items in a couple classrooms, too." In addition, Girl Scouts from several troops in the Centreville/Chantilly area are also participating.

"I ASKED THEM to write something to enclose in the packages, so they're creating homemade, holiday cards or letters," said Maresca. "Each and every care package will have a homemade card, and I think that's really neat. And although the soldiers love the items they receive, they tell us the best part is the card or letter they receive. So we highly encourage people to add a little, personal note or card and tape it to the item they're donating."

For more information about the program, see anysoldier.com. "It really is rewarding to know we're able to show our support for the troops who are overseas and away from their homes, families and friends," said Maresca. "Getting care packages to the troops is a nice thing to do." "This is our way of giving back to our friends and neighbors who are serving in hostile environments overseas," he added. "Thanks to the generosity of our customers, and the support of the community, we hope to touch the lives of as many soldiers as possible who would otherwise receive nothing from home."

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