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IN MY OPINION

Women exemplify how to bring uplift to others

All it takes at times is caring touch, sympathetic word

RICH HAAG

My heart has ached for others all week. Has yours?

The shootings at Virginia Tech took place about 180 miles away. Yet I hurt for the survivors as I read the news and saw the photos of stunned classmates.

I spent the week thinking about this special part of being human: empathy. Feeling our neighbor's joy and pain. Loving in the broadest, most perfect sense.

And I began to see it in many places.

Like on Wednesday, when I went to Marcia Theroux's home off of Rocky River Road.

Diane Schneider, Maribell Chittenden and Marcia were packing presents for people they've never met.

They belong to the University City Women's Group. It recently joined a program called Any Soldier, which helps people send care packages to our troops. Marcia, Maribell and Diane volunteered to send gifts in April.

Marcia and Maribell were sorting materials on the dining room table when I arrived. Shipping boxes, bubble wrap, Ziploc bags and mounds of snacks, soaps and other gifts covered the pink tablecloth.

Diane came bearing more toiletries.

I spent the next hour watching the women carefully pack items so they wouldn't leak in the intense desert heat.

As they packed and talked, I also saw them mentally glide back and forth from this gathering in Marcia's dining room to another one, a couple of weeks from now in Iraq, when men and women the ages of their children open these gifts and share with their fellow soldiers, while the three women watch, and smile.

"I went online (to www.anysoldier.com), and it said you could designate for a man or a woman, so I bought for a woman," Maribell said. "I bought some smelly stuff."

"My father was in the Persian Gulf in World War II, so I'm doing this in honor of my father," Diane said.

Maribell held up a copy of Wednesday's Observer -- the one with a photo of mourning students at the Virginia Tech candlelight service.

"I'm sending that, too, so they can get caught up on the news," Maribell said.

Marcia packed a car magazine. Marcia knows about people who love cars. She has a '59 DeSoto in the garage.

Playing cards for poker, beef jerky and granola bars for snacks, suntan lotion for protection all went into the boxes.

Marcia cautioned her friends to double-bag every liquid and paste, as she had read to do on the Any Soldier Web site.

"They say, 'If it can leak, it will,'" Marcia said.

"My dad told me stories about Iraq," Diane said. "It was 130 in the shade. They had to soak their beds with water to go to sleep, and they'd be dry in the morning."

"I just got back from Timbuktu. It was 110," Maribell said.

She had brought Crystal Light On The Go drink mix for the soldiers.

"When I was in Africa these came in so handy," she said. "You just put it in your water bottle."

Marcia and Maribell had brought personal notes to put in their boxes.

"I'm not a letter writer," Diane said. But on Wednesday she became one. While the others packed, she wrote on stationary decorated with Teddy bears and American flags.

"Dear soldier," she began.

Marcia said she had trouble writing, too, until she saw a PBS show on U.S. soldiers in Iraq.

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"Then I knew what to write," she said. She read her note for the others.

It ended with, "As we go through our daily lives sometimes we forget the sacrifices others make. I thank you so much."

Marcia stopped. "Oh, that makes me want to cry," she said.

Ah, the cost and the reward of empathy.

For people in Blacksburg, Va., on Monday, the world must have seemed unbearable. Then others reached out by the thousands with a caring touch, a meal or a sympathetic word.

Each act came with a share of the giver's heart, like those soaps in the gift box to Iraq. And the world got a little more bearable.

In my opinion

On the Web

To learn more about Any Soldier, visit www.ansoldier.com. Rich Haag

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