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Shelby couple sends supplies to son in Afghanistan for Afghan kids

By RYAN STOTTS / La Crosse Tribune

Peter and Joan Allen wanted to help their son, Nathaniel. Nathaniel wanted to help the children in Afghanistan. That help involved toys, clothes and candy.

Nathaniel, 33, is stationed in Afghanistan as part of the U.S. Army's field artillery. He's been able to send his parents e-mails with first-hand accounts of the living conditions of Afghan children. "They've been at war so long," said Joan. "They don't have a way to help each other."

Joan, 60, a part-time nurse at Franciscan Skemp Healthcare, and Peter, 64, a part-time nurse anesthetist at both Franciscan Skemp and Gundersen Lutheran, were motivated by their son's reports.

"The unit that was there before was like a National Guard unit out of Illinois," Joan said. "They had units that could keep them supplied with stuff."

Nathaniel's unit is smaller, Peter said. "They don't have that kind of luxury," he said.

So, when Nathaniel described children unclothed in 40-degree weather, it sparked action.

Peter spent \$1,500 to \$2,000 of his own money to send cooking utensils, binoculars, a griddle and frying pans for his son, but also included plastic-wrapped candy. The soldiers throw the candy out to the children as they pass through town.

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Together, Peter and Joan started sending clothes and toys for the children out of their town of Shelby home, then turned to their church — English Lutheran in La Crosse — for help.

"The boxes have been flying out of the church," said English Lutheran Associate Pastor Melinda Pupillo. "It was fun."

Pupillo made an announcement during the children's sermon, and then made boxes available for donations.

"It almost ended up being kid-to-kid," Pupillo said.

And the boxes used weren't just any old boxes, Joan said.

They were special flat-rate military mailing boxes available at the post office. They come in two sizes, with a third larger size being introduced this week. They can hold up to 20 pounds of materials and can cost up to \$10 to ship.

There are also customs forms to be filled out, and several restrictions on the mailing addresses, she said, but anyone who wants to help Nathaniel and the children can visit his profile online at www.ansoldier.com for more information.

"I try and create what he wants, just trying to make his quality of life better," Peter said.

"He was in Iraq for a year," Joan said. "I felt helpless there, because I didn't know how to help him. (Now) I feel like I'm helping him."

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