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Published on YourSouthhills (<http://www.yoursouthhills.com>)

Woman helping 'Any Soldier' she can

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Created Feb 28 2008 - 12:00am

Marilyn Pfaff trades e-mails with a 21-year-old interpreter in Afghanistan every few days. She knows his name, that he assists a sergeant in the U.S. Army who commands a local Afghani battalion, and that he helps pay for his brother's education.

Pfaff, a Whitehall resident, has never met the young Afghani man, and can't identify him in pictures posted online.

Yet he calls Pfaff his American mother.

Such is the bond created by anysoldier.com, a Web site that allows civilians to send packages to soldiers abroad, and sometimes to those the soldiers defend.

Whitehall Diamond Outreach started a goods drive recently with the intention of sending everyday items -- socks, snacks, drink mixes, magazines, T-shirts, shampoo and soap -- to soldiers, via the Web site, around Memorial Day.

Drive organizers placed a collection bin in the Whitehall Public Library and hope to establish one somewhere in Caste Village soon.

Diamond Outreach -- comprised of members of Whitehall Borough Council, the library, Friends of the Whitehall Library and the Whitehall Recreation Board -- will choose which soldiers to send packages to after all the goods are collected.

Pfaff, a member of Diamond Outreach, and councilwoman Linda Book played primary roles in organizing the drive.

For Book, the drive has personal meaning. She served in the Army from 1974 to 1976, and was stationed in Europe.

"During wartime, being away from home, a thousand miles away, just getting a letter in the mail was wonderful," Book said.

She attempted to organize a drive locally before. Book placed ads in local newspapers, asking families to notify her if they have relatives in the armed services. But no one came forward. Since civilians cannot send packages to non-family members in the military, Book was out of luck.

Pfaff, not long after the failed drive, learned how civilians bypass the military's postal restrictions: anysoldier.com, which was launched in 2004 by a military family to help send care packages. Soldiers agree to represent their units. They receive packages and check them for harmful substances before passing them on to other soldiers.

In October, University of Pittsburgh Medical Center held a collection drive for Any Soldier. Pfaff assisted in the organization of the drive because she works for the corporate communications department at UPMC. She began researching soldier's stories on the Web site and developed an addiction she has yet to kick.

"I just became enthralled by the stories of the contacts in all the different services," Pfaff said. "It's almost like they reach off the page and grab your heart."

More than 3,700 soldiers represent their units on the Web site. Both soldiers and civilian volunteers sign up by registering on the site. There are more than 35,000 civilians involved, according to anysoldier.com.

Items in high demand include socks, hygiene products, snacks, Kool-Aid and sometimes CDs or DVDs.

Aside from receiving the goods, the sponsor soldiers send updates back to Any Soldier "junkies."

Pfaff said not all soldiers write beautiful prose. Some leave basic requests. Others add a note of thanks on the end. But even the inarticulate soldiers still read loud and clear.

"The emotion shines through," she said.

Pfaff checks the Web site at least once a day. She has placed more than 100 posts on forum boards since becoming a member in mid-November. She corresponds with eight soldiers on a semi-weekly basis and has sent packages to 13 soldiers. She chats with them on a first-name basis and asks about their wives. She considers every second she spends communicating or sending packages a service to the soldiers.

"They just want to know that we haven't thrown them away and walked away," Pfaff said.

Pfaff's favorite contacts are the sergeant in Afghanistan and his interpreter. Neither name can be published for the safety of the

interpreter and his family.

She discovered the less-published side of military life through her correspondence.

"It is astonishing how much humanitarian work they are doing over there," Pfaff said.

The sergeant helps train members of the Afghanistan National Army. Many of the Afghani soldiers possess very little -- some brave the region's brutal winters in sandals.

"They have nothing. They have no family, no supplies. Their country is devastated," Pfaff said.

When she first discovered the sergeant's interpreter, Pfaff decided to send a box of notepads, pencils and other seemingly mundane items to him. Pfaff was surprised to get an e-mail in response. "He was almost incoherent, he was so excited," Pfaff said.

As a token of their appreciation, the soldier and interpreter decided to send Pfaff a gift of their own. She was instructed in an e-mail to let them know if she liked the present when it arrived.

"It could have been a rock," Pfaff said. "Do you think I would have said I didn't like it?"

Rather than a rock, Pfaff received an aged, hand-carved jewelry box made of solid wood. The interior was refurbished, but the outside remained worn.

Pfaff said she hesitates to treat the box with any sort of lacquer or stain. She hasn't had it appraised to find out how old or how expensive it is, and doesn't plan on it. She deeply appreciates the gift, but has never expected anything in return for her efforts.

So why does she do it?

"It's not because I'm this angel with a halo," Pfaff said. "I'm not doing it for the thanks. I'm doing it because it's something I feel I should do. They're fighting over there so we're not fighting over here."

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