

MARTINSVILLE BULLETIN

Co-workers send packages, greetings to soldiers in Iraq

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By AMANDA BUCK - Bulletin Staff Writer

Thirty-two soldiers serving in Iraq have received a little bit of home this holiday season, thanks to a group of 15 Martinsville co-workers.

Jennifer Higgins, Melissa Boaz, Lisa Williams and Daphne Barbour, who work together at Martinsville Physician Practices (MPP), recently spearheaded a drive to send holiday cards and care packages to the 422nd Civil Affairs Battalion of the Army Reserve. They chose the unit because one of its members, Joshua Harr, is the son of a nurse who works across the hall from MPP.



A group of co-workers at Martinsville Physician Practices recently sent care packages to soldiers in Iraq. Shown above are (front row, from left) Dr. James Isernia, Valerie Laufenberg, Mary Cressell and Denise Orange. Second row: Beth Harr (mother of Spc. Joshua Harr), Jennifer Higgins, Melissa Boaz, Lori Lovelace, Patricia Kidd, Lisa Williams, Kathy Sedwick-Gunter, Regina Penn and Judy Gordon.

The women's initial plan was "to send a little bit of home to the troops in Iraq," Higgins said. "Our first idea was to send holiday cards, and it just blew up from there into a bigger project," and 15 MPP employees became involved.

The women approached Beth Harr, a nurse who works for Dr. Sam Sprehe, and asked if her son's unit might like to receive care packages. Harr was floored by their generosity.

"It blew my mind," she recalled. "It made me feel so warm and so fuzzy. ... I actually went out and cried because it just touched me so much."

Joshua Harr, 20, joined the Army Reserve in 2006, while he was a senior at Magna Vista High School. He had never been in JROTC, so the decision surprised Beth and Joshua's dad, Ernest Harr.

"It never really dawned on me that he would do this," Beth Harr recalled. "Then he came home one day and said, 'I'm joining the Army Reserves.'"

Joshua joined the service to pay for his college education, his mother said. He attended the University of North Carolina at Pembroke before leaving for Iraq on July 30. His unit, which is based in Greensboro and attached to the 82nd Airborne out of Ft. Bragg, focuses on humanitarian aid.

Although Joshua "still has to bang down doors and worry about the IED (improvised explosive device) bombs, that's not his main job description," his mom said.

His duties have ranged from helping dispense medications at a hospital to passing out blankets and kerosene heaters to Iraqi civilians. Beth Harr said her son's most memorable experience so far involved helping mentally handicapped children and adults in a group home.

"His unit found these people, and they were able to get them hooked up with relief aid" such as food, clothing and shoes, Harr said. The children had never had a birthday party before, so the soldiers planned one for them, she added.

Although the Harts and their two younger sons, Ethan, 16, and Wyatt, 12, communicate with Joshua frequently by e-mail and send him packages, Beth said some of the soldiers in his unit do not receive much mail. So she has "kind of adopted those four as well."

That is another reason the donations from MPP meant so much, she said. The employees there collected calling cards, personal hygiene items, candy, over-the-counter medications, lotion and more to send to the unit. They got everyone's names from Harr and sent individualized cards to each soldier, Higgins and Barbour said.

"They should have gotten at least 10 cards apiece because everybody in the staff send cards" to each soldier, Barbour said.

The messages they wrote in the cards told the soldiers "that our prayers were with them and our thoughts, and we could never thank them enough for what they were doing for us," Barbour said.

The donations MPP staff members collected filled 10 boxes, which they mailed shortly after Thanksgiving. On Dec. 8, Barbour received an e-mail from Maj. Tim Cox, a team chief with Harr's unit, saying the soldiers had received the packages.

"I wanted to send a quick note to give my sincere thanks for your kindness and support," Cox wrote. "Please let all your fellow co-workers know that the packages were truly appreciated." The women said the project was such a success that they hope to repeat it.

"We actually want to do it again for different occasions," Williams said. "Hopefully it won't come to that, but if they're still over there, we'd like to do Valentine's" and other holidays. Harr, who said her son's unit also has received cards and packages from students, the 4-H Shooting Club and other doctors' offices in the area, couldn't say thank you enough.

"That was just wonderful; that just blessed me to no end," she said. "They don't know how much. I think that everybody over there is going to appreciate it."

Joshua Harr is scheduled to return from Iraq in June. He also has a leave coming up and might make it home to Ridgeway in time for Christmas, his mom said.



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