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CITY & STATE

Soldier's mission: Help Afghan children

Greenwood native's Operation Dreamseed funnels donated school supplies and clothes.

By Jon Murray
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Todd Schmidt's idea took root during a conversation with his mother before his Army unit left for Afghanistan, and it sprouted during Internet exchanges with a Texas history teacher.

In less than a year, his effort has brought backpacks, school supplies and winter clothes to thousands of children struggling in poverty as Afghanistan emerges from decades of civil war.

Capt. Schmidt, 32, a Greenwood native, founded Operation Dreamseed after the 25th Infantry Division, normally based in Hawaii, arrived last April at Kandahar Airfield.

Since then, the organization has grown. Other soldiers help deliver supplies sent by Maple Grove Elementary in Johnson County, where Schmidt's mother teaches, and by schools, groups and individuals from nearly every state.

On Wednesday, Schmidt helped soldiers from the Georgia National Guard deliver 1 ton of supplies to an isolated mountain town.

"Believe it or not," he wrote this week in an e-mail, "even with 3 feet of snow in this remote, mountainous village of Nele Zaragak in the Ghor Province, many children were without shoes."



Army Capt. Todd Schmidt gives school supplies to children in a village on the outskirts of Kandahar, Afghanistan, about 10 miles from the airfield where he is stationed. -- Photo provided by Capt. Todd Schmidt

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Information on Operation Dreamseed

Operation Dreamseed accepts tax-deductible donations of school supplies and winter clothes.

A basic supply kit contains a notebook, a folder, three pens, three pencils, crayons, a pencil sharpener, an eraser, a ruler, glue bottle or stick, scissors, a coloring or activity book, candy, a toy and a backpack.

• Supply kits can be sent through regular mail to Capt. Schmidt in Afghanistan at: Todd Schmidt, A/1-62 ADA, 3 BCT HQ, APO AE 09355. Money can be donated at:

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Schmidt estimated more than 3,000 children received shoes, clothing or school supplies.

This week's delivery was the largest since the first large-scale mission in December at a soccer field, where 2,500 schoolchildren from Kandahar had gathered to receive backpacks and school supplies. Schmidt also has organized smaller deliveries.

Since the fall, Maple Grove students have collected clothes and sent them to Schmidt.

"All the classes contributed, and the student council just collected them from each room," said his mother, Wendy, who teaches fifth grade at the school.

The idea behind her son's project is simple, Wendy Schmidt said.

"To make a change anywhere," she said, "you change the children. You reach out to the next generation. You build a trust, and you build a bridge for the future."

The idea caught on quickly back home.

Last summer, Triumph Church in Greenwood began sending school supplies. Other organizations outside the state have sent items as well -- including Wunderlich Intermediate School in Houston.

Daya Watkins, a history teacher at the school, met Todd Schmidt last summer through a Web site called anysoldier.com. It links units overseas with people who want to send letters or care packages.

Schmidt told her about his desire to give children in Afghanistan the tools they need in an education system where some children sit on dirt floors inside crumbling buildings.

Watkins' students send school supplies periodically, she said, and last week assembled 135 more kits.

"I know they have definitely gotten out of it an appreciation for what our servicemen and women do each and every day," the teacher said.

Watkins has served as an assistant to Schmidt, who sometimes joins Operation Dreamseed's board of directors for meetings over the telephone.

Two chief warrant officers in the Georgia National Guard, Charles Woodward and Mark Johansen, helped organize Wednesday's delivery with help from their children's schools in Savannah, Ga.

"We wanted to leave a positive legacy," Woodward said.

Schmidt said each delivery is greeted by children's smiles.

His unit will end its yearlong mission in April.

He will return to his wife, Joy, in Waipahu, Hawaii, before moving to Washington to earn a master's degree at Georgetown University.

But the unit replacing his at Kandahar Airfield has promised to continue working with Operation Dreamseed, Schmidt said this week in a telephone interview from Afghanistan.

One of his brightest moments came in December at the soccer field.

Less than two months after Afghanistan's presidential election, he said, 10 Afghan students -- five boys and five girls -- spoke in a contest titled "I Choose Freedom."

One student in particular caught his attention.

"She spoke about how she had written a poem that compared freedom and democracy in Afghanistan . . . to coming out of a cocoon."

Call Star reporter Jon Murray at (317) 444-2710.

Operation Dreamseed Inc., 1 Kimberly Drive, Rhinebeck, NY 12572.

For more information, visit the organization's [Web site](#) or send an e-mail to mail@operationdreamseed.org.

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