

Saturday April 1, 2006

NEWS

NEIGHBORS

Owego girl rallies support for troops

OWEGO - Fourth-graders don't know much about Iraq and they don't pay much attention to the news - even when that news is about war.

But when Brianna Cart of Owego began writing to a soldier and sending packages to him and the other men in his unit, her perspective quickly changed.

Now, she and her mom, Maryanne Van Burger, think about SFC Alexander Van and his men sometimes during the day and wonder if they're safe.

"And we pray for them all the time," Maryanne says.

What started as their own tiny project is branching out now in many directions. From all corners of the community, people are helping to fill Brianna's boxes or else contacting other soldiers on their own.

The idea originally came through a customer getting his hair cut at Maryanne's shop. Ed Meyers of Owego had heard about a Web site that connected civilians with soldiers. He and his son picked out four names, collected donations from a few friends and sent four packages.

They got one letter back, from a man with five children. He really appreciated the treats in the package, he said, because his family is struggling to live on his Army paycheck while he's overseas.

Brianna and her mom logged onto the same Web site, www.anysoldier.com, and chose a soldier.



SCOTT ELDRIDGE / Press & Sun-Bulletin

Brianna Cart, a 10-year-old from Owego, demonstrates how she packs a care package for soldiers in Iraq.



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"He sounded really nice," says Brianna, who's 10. So she wrote to him, telling him about her cockapoo, Lady, and her life.

And she asked questions.

Now Brianna knows the weather in Iraq is going to be really sizzling in the coming months, so she should send powder mix for cold drinks now rather than hot cocoa.

"Baghdad is pretty torn up," he told her in a letter. "They splice into the streetlights for electricity; there is really no running sewage system; and they dig down and find water lines and run hoses to them."

Many people smile at the soldiers and wave, he said, but some give them hateful looks and a few throw rocks. "They are afraid to talk to us," he wrote. "They are scared the insurgents will retaliate against them if they even give the impression that they are helping us."

He and the other soldiers really appreciate the letters they receive. It's good to know they're supported back home, he said.

Brianna and her mom spent \$65 sending a big box filled with items recommended on the Web site. After reading the soldier's letters, they wanted to do more, but they couldn't afford to spend that much every month. So Brianna wrote a letter and talked to local store managers, asking if they would help fill the next package.

Many local stores pitched in. One gave her a little basket and told her to fill it up; another told her to pick out \$20 worth of trial-size toiletries.

She decorated a tin can and put it in her mom's hair salon, and made yellow ribbons for people to take as her "thank-you." Many customers gave donations.

The parent group at Brianna's school, Apalachin Elementary, agreed to receive donations for the project, which is now called Angels Over Iraq.

"I think it's awesome," says school Principal Joseph DiCosimo.

"We're reaching out to help those who need it," he says. "And it's good that kids become aware of the world around them."

TO LEARN MORE

If you'd like to support Brianna Cart's efforts, mail donations to the Apalachin Elementary School Parent Plus Group, 405 Pennsylvania Ave., Apalachin, N.Y. 13732, with "Angels Over Iraq" in the subject line. Log onto anysoldier.com to see the Web site that connects soldiers with civilians.

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