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Bedtime stories from far, far away

With donated books, distant soldiers tape themselves reading aloud for kids

BY EMILY SEFTEL / The (Phoenix) Arizona Republic

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When Caleb Pipes wants his father, Gregory, to read a story to him, the 2 1/2-year-old asks his mom to put on the video.

Pipes, an army captain, is stationed in Bagram, Afghanistan, thousands of miles from his family in Germany. Pipes didn't want the distance to stand between him and his children, so he started "Read to Me, Daddy (or Mommy)," a program in which soldiers taped themselves reading a children's book. They would then send the video and the book home so their children could watch and follow along.

"This idea, while new to me, has been around the military for a while," Pipes e-mailed from Afghanistan. "There is a program set up already here at Bagram, but it is difficult to utilize."

In fact, it can take as long as a month to get in front of the camera due to demand. After a conversation with the soldier who runs the program, Pipes decided to try to set up a camera and monitor in a private room just for the 150 soldiers in his company.

He connected through a posting on anysoldier.com with Theresa Killingsworth, a fourth-grade Phoenix teacher. She asked students to donate items for soldiers overseas as part of her school's Character Counts program. Their donations filled 71 boxes, and Killingsworth agreed to look out for kids' books to send.

Killingsworth contacted Sandra Carpenter, a Phoenix-area district marketing manager at Borders Books and Music, and they developed a local book drive.

"It's too cool," Carpenter says. "[Pipes] is so wonderful to have even dreamed this up. To be able to read to your kids when you're so far away is just amazing."

The program has two goals, Killingsworth says. First, organizers want to collect at least 600 books,

which Pipes feels would be sufficient for his company. Second, the program will promote reading to children, showing how important it is even under seemingly impossible circumstances.

As for Pipes, the videos strengthen his bond with his children.

"[The children] have overwhelmingly responded to my videos," he wrote. "We recently obtained the use of some webcams, and I got to see my kids for the first time in four months. My wife said that after that day, my son, Caleb, has wanted to watch the Daddy videos over and over again. That proved to me that these videos are truly a link between me and my small children."

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