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## Children encourage U.S. troops overseas

By Amanda Bittle, Staff Writer

The holidays are a time for connecting with family and friends.

Members of the U.S. armed forces who are stationed overseas, however, often spend the season thousands of miles from their loved ones.

Three years ago, OCCC Student Spencer Cluff launched Operation Kids 4 Troops to show U.S. soldiers they are not forgotten back home.

In 2005, Operation Kids 4 Troops was a statewide endeavor, connecting approximately 40,000 letters to troops in the Middle East, Cluff said.



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This year, the operation has handled 20,000 letters in the past two months

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alone.

The project helps provide morale-boosting letters and drawings from U.S. children to troops serving in the Middle East, Cluff said.

Cluff has experience in both active duty and reserve military.

He currently serves in the Air Force Reserve.

He also teaches Health Career Certification classes at Metro Tech's Springlake campus, and studies at both OCCC and the University of Central Oklahoma.

He said he was inspired to make American children more aware of the services U.S. troops perform for the country.

"I wanted to amalgamate my civilian life as a teacher with my life in the military and instill a sense of patriotism in Oklahoma youth," he said.

Though the program began with Oklahoma schoolchildren, since its inception, students from more than 10 states have sent letters through Kids 4 Troops.

Cluff receives soldiers' names through a partnership with [www.anysoldier.com](http://www.anysoldier.com), he said. Soldiers add their names to a list on the website, requesting correspondence from home.

Cluff and his wife Carrie then collect, package and mail bundles of supportive letters to the troops.

Another route letters can take to the soldiers involves a partnership with Operation Gratitude.

Operation Gratitude sends care packages to deployed troops.

The program's organizers already send thousands of parcels but were looking for more letters to send with them, Cluff said.

Letters collected by Operation Kids 4 Troops are sent to Operation Gratitude in bulk and attached to the packages.

The program has received attention from a number of Oklahoma politicians, Cluff said.

U.S. Sen. Tom Coburn and Lt. Gov. Mary Fallin are among the politicians who have praised Cluff's efforts.

Operation Kids 4 Troops also has attracted the attention of local media.

The Daily Oklahoman, The Norman Transcript, The Yukon Review and The Mustang Times all have featured Cluff's work numerous times, he said.

News channels 4, 5 and 9 also have provided the program with media attention. The website [www.kids4troops.com](http://www.kids4troops.com) has received 100,000 hits from 26 countries during the past 10 weeks.

With the increased business, Operation Kids 4 Troops could use more

volunteers, Cluff said.

People are needed to read through letters and to help maintain the website.

Donations also are welcome and help to offset the cost of overseas postage, he said.

For more information on Operation Kids 4 Troops, or to send a letter or volunteer, visit [www.kids4troops.com](http://www.kids4troops.com).

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