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Malcolm students support soldiers through letters

by Robert Stewart

Students in Malcolm elementary school's fifth- and sixth-grade classes have recently turned a class assignment into a way to make new friends, open discussion about current events and show their support for our nation's soldiers.

"I have to teach the kids how to write a friendly letter and it's boring to write to no one," said Tami Maytum, english and language arts teacher for the classes.

The students began by writing to Malcolm High School graduates Cory French and Adam Wilson who are currently in training for the Army at West Point and the Navy, respectively.

The correspondence led to visits for the classes from both French and Wilson and discussions amongst the class about other people they knew who were serving in the military.

Two uncles, a father, a cousin—the list began to grow and the students, excited by meeting French and Wilson, were eager to contact more soldiers.

Maytum began to seek out a way in which the nearly 60 students in the classes could write to soldiers without everyone writing to the same person. She found the answer at anysoldier.com.

Anysoldier.com is a website that provides contact information for soldiers currently serving overseas who may not regularly receive mail from the United States.

Maytum selected names from the list and the students began writing letters.

"It's really neat. We get to talk to soldiers who are fighting for our country," Kayla Locke, a student said.

"I think this whole idea was pretty cool because you get to talk to someone who's not your family," added fellow student Nathan Garrison.

The students write their letters and then give them to Maytum who puts them in envelopes she has addressed and makes sure they get mailed.

Maytum said as the project has grown, the students' excitement has grown with it.

"Hardly a day goes by before they ask about responses," she said.

"When we first started I was really excited," student Ryan Larson said.

"I thought it was really cool," Chandler Kramer said.

The students write a new letter every 10 days and send it to the soldier they are in contact with.

Twenty-one of the students in the classes have received responses from the soldier to whom they are writing.

"We realize they (the soldiers) are very busy and that's O.K.," Maytum said. "The response is much better than I expected."

The responses the students have received have been as varied as the soldiers who write them. The class is in communication with soldiers from every branch of the armed forces and who range in rank from private 1st

class to colonel.

The soldiers have sent photos, emails, Iraqi currency, uniform patches and stories. Some letters discuss the things they have in common with the student writing them, some talk about the country in which they are stationed and, in one case, a soldier in a K-9 unit talked about his dog and its unusual allergy.

"My guy that I write to has a dog named Vinny and Vinny is allergic to beef. I like hearing what they do during the day," said student Dylan Swagger.

"We have a lot of the same likes and dislikes. I don't really like math and he doesn't either," Amy Pacula said.

"I said I like football and softball and stuff like that and he wrote back and told me how he like those same sports," Meriel Basset said.

The students keep the original copies of any letters or items they may receive from soldiers and copies of the correspondence are displayed on a large bulletin board in the entry hall of the school.

Some soldiers, such as the one writing to student Heather Crouse, liven up the letter writing process by hiding written messages under the flap and inside the envelope. Crouse said the soldier does not have the best handwriting.

"Heather and I read through his letters together and decipher what he's trying to say," Maytum said.

According to responses the students have gotten from soldiers the letters and drawings the classes are sending to soldiers are warmly appreciated. Drawings are passed amongst the soldiers and hung up in barracks.

"It can, in some ways, make you feel good inside and I'm sure it does them to," student Zach Klenke said.

Maytum said the letter-writing process has served as an opportunity to open discussion about various topics, including the difference between supporting the war and supporting the soldiers fighting in the war.

She said that before the students started writing, the classes talked about the possibility that they may not get a response from the soldier they write to, it may take a long time before they received a response from a soldier, the soldier they are writing may become a casualty or they might make a new friend in the person they are writing.

Student Chandler Kramer is hoping to meet the soldier he has been in contact with when the soldier comes to York later this year to visit relatives.

For Maytum, the success of the project has been good for the students and helped the soldiers as well.

"Although it started off as a writing project we're doing this to support them (the soldiers)," she said.

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