

Troop relationships facilitated through grassroots campaign



As the holidays approach, military men and women will be celebrating in Iraq and Afghanistan. These brave members of the National Guard and will be spending their holiday season more than 6,000 miles away from their homes and loved ones. For many, this is their third and even fourth tour of duty in the Middle East.

Here at home, Americans want to show their support for all the brave men and women overseas. To achieve that goal, one resident, Charlie Uhrmann of Mount Olive is spearheading a grassroots campaign. The goal is threefold. First, the campaign will provide continuing military awareness and support throughout the community. Secondly, a drive will be held to collect letters of support and requested items for the troops. Finally, funds will need to be raised to cover the costs of overseas shipping.

Organizations around Morris County have been invited to participate in this initiative by adopting their own troop and by starting their own “Morris County Cares Campaign”. The MCCC will provide a contact name, a list of requested items, a photo of the sponsored troop, preprinted postcards for supporters to send personalized messages, pens, two posters, and a short video. Participants are encouraged to use the postcard as a fundraising tool to offset the high cost of shipping overseas.

Photo: Students participate in the MCC
Pictured L-R: Eric Wood, Rebecca Dermanjin, Mark Wizner, Shane Dermanjin, Nick Stefiniw, Jeremy Karl, Steve Konrad, Dan Nussbaum, Chris Brooks, & Paul Tritt.

The donations and letters that are collected will be shipped to the troops in time for the holidays. The final collection date is set for November 20.

“When I learned the U.S. was going to increase the number of service members overseas, I decided to create a mission where we would provide those deployed with what they need” Uhrmann said.

Morris County Cares is important to Uhrmann. She is passionate about what can be accomplished on a local and State level, and sees it as a way to build a bridge between our citizens at home and those serving their country overseas. She views herself only as a facilitator. MCC is approaching things somewhat differently from other organizations, “We are making direct contact with deployed service members and providing them with only the items they are requesting” Uhrmann said. “We first receive a specific need or request from an individual or unit, then recruit a sponsor who is willing to fulfill those needs. In most cases, Sponsors receive a copy of the request, photographs if available and many times information surrounding their living conditions.”

Once the items are collected, the boxes are sent directly to the individual or unit. We add pens, paper, envelopes and the contact information of the sponsor in each package so that the recipients can communicate directly to their sponsor, if that is their desire. ”

Uhrmann points out that Morris County Cares is careful about their collection. “I carefully review the lists of items being requested, confirm that we are the only organization that has been contacted and forward that request to a sponsor. We also get a list of items they don’t want to receive.” She also points out that the soldiers are in very cramped quarters so they send only what is requested. “We take into consideration that many do not have refrigerators and storage facilities. We remain mindful of our donors. We certainly do not want to ask someone for a donation, only to see it thrown out or go to waste. That sets a bad precedent all the way around. People work hard for their money.”

The campaign has been growing steadily throughout the county. “The response has been wonderful,” Uhrmann said, “This month we have 42 units covered. The units range from as many as 80 to as little as 12.”

Participation has ranged from churches and community organizations to schools and private groups or individuals. “I have been even contacted by mothers who lost their own sons in Iraq. Several have stepped up and asked to adopt a unit to do their own troop drive. People are extremely generous. They want to help, but just need some direction and opportunity.” Uhrmann explained that individuals and groups of any size can participate. “If it’s a small group, I assign them a small troop.”

Eric Wood, an 11th grader at Mt. Olive High School, asked friends to get involved in adopting a troop. “This is when you know you have true friends,” Wood said. “I just told them I needed help.”

Mark Wizner, a 12th grader at Mt. Olive High School, was the first to agree to help. For Wizner, however, the campaign has a deeper meaning. Upon graduation in June, Wizner will be joining the U.S. Army as an infantryman. Eventually he hopes to go to airborne school, but for now, he is looking forward to serving his country. “I’m excited,” he said. “I’d be proud to fight against terrorism. I know I’d be scared, but I’d want to go for my country and the people who were killed by the terrorists.”

“Eric asked me to help,” Steve Konrad, also a senior at the school, said. “We’re going around collecting donations. I went around to teachers and got a lot of cards. It felt pretty good.”

Classmate Rebecca Dermanjin agreed, saying she looks forward to corresponding with the troop. “If I can, that’d be cool.”

“The response at our school has been great,” said Wood. “The first night we had at least 300 letters and over \$100 in donations. One guy gave us \$20. He said he was over in Iraq and really appreciated what we were doing. After six years, some people are forgetting that we’re still over there. They’re getting used to it. This raises awareness.”

Local residents can also participate in the campaign on Halloween night in a unique way. Uhrmann is hosting a drive at her home from noon until 9 p.m. “I will have a festive tent set up with hot apple cider, hot chocolate, dunking for apples, treats, and a table where people can take a moment to write our troops. Eric solicited our entire neighborhood (179) homes for donations. I pray we will have great success. For more information about the Morris Count Cares Campaign, contact Charlie Wood Uhrmann, MCC Campaign Organizer, at (908) 684-0057.