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Kalama family provides treats for the troops

By Dawn Johnson-Deal

Mar 11, 2006 - 11:51:44 pm PST

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KALAMA -- A box of simple items -- shampoo, toothpaste, cookies and playing cards -- can be a welcome reminder of home to a soldier overseas.

Fifth-grader Emily Stiles of Kalama set a goal of sending 25 boxes of "home" to soldiers overseas. She met that goal earlier this month.

"I thought it was a good goal, cause that's a lot of boxes," said Emily, 12.

During her winter break from St. Rose Elementary School, Emily found the Web site www.anysoldier.com, which allows her to send packages to soldiers overseas who disperse the contents to others in their unit.

Emily recruited the help of her parents, Blake and Ann Stiles, and her 14 year-old sister, Jennifer.

"We don't know anyone over there," Ann Stiles said, "We're just trying to imagine what they're going through."

One unit asked for letters to give to soldiers who don't get mail, another requested birthday party things. A Fort Lewis hospital unit in Afghanistan treats a lot of Afghan children and wanted Beanie Babies and little treats to give to them. "Most of them want food," Emily said.

Snacks and drink mixes to add to the water are on everyone's list. Toiletries such as razors, soap and aspirin also are popular.

Ann Stiles estimates they've made 300 soldiers smile who are "hungry for something from home."

Emily has a donation jar and a drawing of Iraq at her school. Every time they send a box they mark the drawing with a smiley face and details about the person they sent it to.

Emily met with the managers of Longview businesses and got a good response, she said. She even used a \$25 gift card she got for Christmas to buy aspirin, toothpaste and deodorant.

"I've learned that giving really makes you feel a lot better than receiving I think," Emily said. "It makes me so happy in knowing that soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan are helping us, and we get to help them."

Her sister, Jennifer, approached stores in Woodland. She helps Emily pack the boxes and writes notes and cards for them. She's using this experience to earn points towards her Silver Award, the highest recognition a Girl Scout in grades six through nine can earn.

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Through www.anysoldier.com they ordered free boxes, tape, customs forms and labels. The 11 x 8.5 x 5.5 flat-rate boxes weigh between eight and 10 pounds when filled. "We stick as much as we can in there," Ann said.

Each box includes a lucky penny with a three leaf clover cut into it and a hand-written card of thanks. Some included thank-you baseballs with the words "from grateful Americans" and the date written on them.

Packages are shipped to New York for \$8 and sent overseas from there. They take about two weeks to reach their destination. The only downfall is the paperwork.

"There's like 10 copies," Emily said.

She's met her goal, but the family plans to do more.

"We have more stuff," her mother said, "We're going to keep making boxes and sending boxes until we're out of stuff."

Emily said she hopes others will log on the Web site and join in.

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