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[Sharing the Gift of Michael](#)



Photo courtesy of Tim Parker

Marine's death inspires a gift that continues to grow.

NW GUILFORD COUNTY – This is a story of a bereaved couple reaching beyond their grief to help others. It's also the story of a father and son, both far from home in different locations, and of helping friends through difficult circumstances. And it's all tied together.

Back in February 2002, Michael Crews joined the Marines. After training, the 19-year-old from Kernersville was deployed aboard the USS Enterprise in support of Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom.

While Michael was overseas, his father and stepmother, Tommy and Linda Crews, regularly sent him "care packages," which he shared with the other Marines. "These guys can't just go to the corner store and buy things," Tommy Crews says.

Michael returned to the United States in February 2004. Although he survived the dangerous conditions surrounding his deployment, he died in an automobile accident in May 2004 near Camp Lejeune. He was laid to rest in the cemetery at Moravia Moravian Church in Oak Ridge, where he was a member.

Even after Michael's death, the Crews continued to send items overseas to men and women in the military. They keep a box on the dining room table that they fill with miscellaneous items military personnel might need, and about once a week, they ship it off. Toothbrushes and toothpaste, deodorant, baby wipes, magazines, cookies and other needed or wanted items are purchased at discount stores, when they're on sale or when a coupon gives them a significant discount. "We need to make a Big Lots run," Linda Crews says she tells her husband if the box isn't full.

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Even when they didn't personally know anyone overseas, they went to the Web site www.anysoldier.com and chose someone at random. "There's always somebody's brother, somebody's son over there. We just feel like we can't do enough to help them," Tommy Crews says.

Among the recipients of the couple's care packages is Tim Parker, who also is a member at Moravia Moravian. A lieutenant with the Guilford County Sheriff's Office, Parker is also a major in the N.C. National Guard with 28 years of service. Parker's world changed dramatically when he was called to active duty in May 2006. He served 16 months as the administrative officer at the field artillery brigade in Greensboro. Last December, he was deployed to Afghanistan, where he serves as an adviser to the Afghan army in Helmand Province.

Following in his father's footsteps, Parker's son, Thomas, decided to join the N.C. National Guard in the summer of 2006. In September, he was deployed to Iraq, where he works as a combat engineer searching for explosive devices.

Tommy and Linda Crews now regularly send packages to both of the Parkers. "Since Michael's death, the Crewses have been as active as any couple I know in supporting our soldiers," says Tim Parker via e-mail. "It is almost as if the loss of Michael has resulted in unflinching loyalty to the people they care so deeply for – people who serve in the military. To me, I just recognize it as the 'gift of Michael.'"

Recently, Parker says, a squad of Marines came through his camp on their way to a military outpost. "They were young proud warriors with impeccable manners and military bearing," he says. The young men reminded him of Michael, and he gave them some of the care packages he had received from Tommy and Linda. Then he told them the story behind "the gift of Michael."

Parker says the young soldiers reacted like children at Christmas. "Watching them leave with those boxes was the best event of my time here," he says.

Obviously touched, Parker shared the story with several of his friends back home through e-mail, and then challenged them: "What will you do today that applies the 'gift of Michael'? ... These kids are saving your way of life. Make 'Michael's gift' yours too," he said.

Mark Brown of Summerfield accepted the challenge. Brown and Parker served together at the sheriff's department, from which Brown is now retired. The two have known each other about 25 years and were partners when the department had two-man cars. Brown, who is mayor of Summerfield, wants to get others involved as well. As a result, he has arranged with the fire departments in Summerfield, Oak Ridge and Stokesdale to serve as collection points for items to be sent to soldiers. He's gotten Republic Waste to provide collection boxes and Boxboard Products to provide mailing cartons. Brown also has set up bank accounts at the Bank of Oak Ridge (Oak Ridge and Summerfield locations) and SunTrust (Summerfield and Stokesdale), where he hopes residents will make donations to help defray the cost of shipping.

Now he wants local residents to contribute. "After seeing what Tim and his son are having to live in and live through, and seeing their needs and the things not provided by government, I just thought it would be good to go further than what just one person could do," Brown says.

Items to go to active military service members can be dropped off at the Oak Ridge, Stokesdale and Summerfield fire departments. Donations to defray the cost of shipping can be made at the Bank of Oak Ridge locations in Oak Ridge or Summerfield or at SunTrust in Summerfield or Stokesdale – ask for the account set up by Mark Brown for this purpose. For more info, call Brown at 643-4843.

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