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Youngsters show support by sending items to troops

by Maya Calabrese | Special to The Gazette

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Empty boxes were stacked high above the table, which was covered with food, stuffed animals, toiletries and CDs labeled, "For the Soldiers."

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"You have to label them; otherwise, [the Iraqis] will take them and sell them to the soldiers when they were the soldiers' to begin with," said College Park resident Robin Prakash, who spent her summer working with three Silver Spring youths to send care packages to the soldiers in Iraq.

Prakash, who provides child care for the children, began the project in mid-July as a way to let the soldiers and their families know that they are appreciated.

"I did it to raise awareness and let the soldiers know that we're thinking about them. They fight for us because they see it as their duty. This is our duty," Prakash said.

Prakash was especially enthused about the project because of her own experiences when her brother went to fight in Vietnam for 18 months. "I was 11, but even at a young age I realized things weren't the same. My parents were somewhere else with all the stress and strain, and it was like that until he came home. We have to take care of [the soldiers]," she said.



Laurie DeWitt/The Gazette

Robin Prakash of College Park has organized some of the children she cares for in Silver Spring to collect items to ship to troops in Iraq. From left are Samantha Burke, 12, Suki Blandwitt, 10, and Shannon Burke, 10.

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With the help of Samantha and Shannon Burke, 12 and 10, and Suki Blandwitt, 10, Prakash ran a bake sale at The Maryland Book Exchange in College Park that raised \$180 for shipping costs. “Suki dressed up as a clown and I would do cartwheels and pick up her hat,” Shannon Burke said.

Whether they were providing entertainment to attract a crowd, or picking up boxes of donated goods, the girls were constantly active. “If it’s something they’re willing to do, we get them out there,” said Jim Burke, father of Samantha and Shannon.

The girls also wrote letters to the soldiers, one for each box they packed. “I wrote to them like they were a friend,” said Samantha Burke, who used a card decorating kit she had to put horses on her cards.

All the items the group packed were donations from neighbors and friends. Muhemmad and Yasmin Ahmad, owners of the Jasmine Bazaar in Silver Spring, donated \$130 worth of items, the biggest donation the group received. In total, they received more than \$500 worth of items.

To find out just what to ask for and send, Jim Burke visited the Web site www.anysoldier.com, where the soldiers listed items they need. The site also listed soldiers who would accept packages. “People sign up to represent their unit and they hand out the items,” he said.

As her packing project came to an end, Prakash began working on a personal project to collect Beanie Babies and stuffed animals for Iraqi children.

“I saw a program that said the only time soldiers feel safe is when the kids are there, so it’s good that they have stuff to give to the kids,” Prakash said.

When she was searching for stuffed animals in a thrift store one day, Prakash met a man who just got out of the Air Force. After talking to him for some time, the man offered to pay for all the stuffed animals Prakash wanted. “He said I was instilling qualities in the kids that they will take forever. He was very grateful,” Prakash said.

To donate stuffed animals to the cause, call Robin Prakash at 240-351-4172.

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