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Mother's mission is to send a little comfort to lot of troops

Care package for officer's son inspires effort to remember scores of soldiers

By Alex P. Kellogg

Tribune staff reporter

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When Babette Elarde-Hatzis, a Chicago police officer, learned last May that her son Jonathan had been assigned to Iraq, she immediately started putting together a little care package for him. First, she imagined it as something he would get in the mail for the Memorial Day weekend.

When she missed her deadline, Elarde-Hatzis grew more ambitious, collecting a number of gifts. With the holiday season approaching, she decided to send as much as she could to as many Americans serving in Iraq as possible.

By Thursday morning, Elarde-Hatzis and her fellow officers at the Chicago Police Department's Homan Square facility had packed up more than 700 boxes and countless loose items and were ready to ship them to Iraq. Many of those who will receive gifts made their requests online at www.anysoldier.us, a privately run Web site. The officers of Homan Square hope the shipment will reach more than 3,000 soldiers.

"This was very important to me," said Elarde-Hatzis, a narcotics officer. "Some of my fellow officers are serving in Iraq. All of the items are things the guys over there requested or needed or wanted."

Included in the shipment were coffee-makers and Gummy Bears candy, as well as salsa donated by Del Ray Tortilla, one of more than 20 companies that provided items.

"Our guys, we just want them to have a little taste of home," said Officer Lori Connolly, Elarde-Hatzis' co-worker. "So many of them have lost so many things already. They don't have the pleasures of home."

Connolly was in charge of making the dozens of candy-stuffed stockings sent with the shipment. She handled many of the letters and donations sent in by friends of officers and others in the community and was often brought to tears.

"Getting the letters from the little kids was tough," Connolly said. "Every time I read one I'd start crying."

Federico Andaverde, a narcotics officer for the last seven years, knows firsthand how much a care package can brighten a soldier's day; he served in the Marines from 1988 to 1992.

"I was in the Gulf in '91 and anything we got we appreciated," said Andaverde, emphasizing the word "anything."

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