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**Wish to help troops becomes project full of care, prayer**

By **MARK I. JOHNSON**  
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EDGEWATER -- In Alyson Rager's small Umbrella Tree Drive bedroom there are the normal accoutrements of a 20-year old, as well as some baskets filled with boxes of breakfast cereal, men's toiletries, baby wipes, crossword puzzles and some flat-fee postage boxes.

A few miles to the south, Charles Barry's West Ariel Road garage and kitchen look like a convenience store exploded as counters, tabletops and bits of floor are covered with bags of potato chips, fruit cups, toothpaste and toothbrushes and packages of gum.

The Southeast Volusians are both part of efforts to support America's troops overseas by sending care packages filled with reminders of home.

"My sisters are both in the National Guard and I remember how much getting mail meant to them during basic training. Not to get it was horrifying," Rager said.

With that in mind, Rager went on the Internet in April and found [www.Anysoldier.com](http://www.Anysoldier.com), a Web site where persons can adopt a soldier and then sent items to him or her. The packages are distributed to personnel who do not regularly get mail.

That was almost 40 packages ago.

However, on a drug store clerk's salary, even with the assistance of her family and donations from work, Rager's efforts took a financial toll.

"It costs \$7.70 to ship each of the boxes," she said.

So she turned to the congregation at St. Gerard's Catholic Church for help.

"I was shocked by the response," she said. "The first time my mom brought stuff home from the church, there were five boxes of suntan lotion, a laundry basket full of food, two boxes of toothpaste and toothbrushes, a box filled with playing cards and poker chips, and I even got two Frisbees."

The church -- Sacred Heart Catholic Church -- is at the center of the care package effort in Barry's kitchen, which is coordinated by the leader of his prayer group, Frank Koehler of New Smyrna Beach.

The 67-year-old Koehler, who has a niece in Iraq -- a colonel in the U.S. Army -- wanted to do something for the troops. He brought the idea of care packages to the six-member group and they

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jumped at the idea. Through his niece's parents, Koehler asked her what her troops might like and she said prayers and letters.

"I thought we should do more," he said. "We have got to help the troops as a whole."

So the group began collecting items from church members and have packed up more than 250 pounds of supplies, in individual boxes, for shipment overseas.

Koehler said his niece said since she and her soldiers are due home in September, she will save the boxes for their replacements.

For its members, the hours the prayer group put into packing and shipping the boxes, not to mention the cost -- about \$400 so far -- sends the message that someone cares.

"We just want to show we support the troops and we wish they were home," said Theresa Gallagher.

Gallagher said she remembers sending letters to her brother, a Navy medic during the Korean War, but this is the first time she sent care packages.

"I feel sorry for the men and women over there," she said.

While most of the reward for these back-home heroes comes from the doing, Rager said she has also gotten something more tangible -- letters and pictures from some of those who have received her generosity.

"When I get a letter it is a high all day," she said.

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