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Soroptimists join the fight

By Paul Boring

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Civilians steeped in their insulated Western lives are often unable to empathize with American troops serving abroad, many of whom face mortal danger every day they awake and assume their duties.

Members of Soroptimist International of Oak Harbor are not donning flak jackets and packing M-16s, but they are collectively rolling up their sleeves and helping to make life a little more bearable for the troops.

The group will be at sites throughout Oak Harbor on three separate occasions this month to collect items that can be sent to men and women serving America and often living in dangerous and squalid conditions.

The service group will take the guess work out of tracking down useful items by making lists available at local stores. Soldiers of both genders will be recipients of the packages, but the members of the local Soroptimists, whose core mission is to improve the lives of women and girls, were particularly drawn to the project upon hearing from Oak Harbor resident Cathy Caryl of the challenges facing servicewomen specifically.

Caryl and her husband took in a 16-year-old boy named Erik five years ago. Through the influence and support of the kind family, the young man brought his grades up and graduated from Oak Harbor High School in 2005. He joined the Army in June of 2006.

"We flew out to Oklahoma for his graduation from basic training and I looked around at all the 'kids' that were graduating and saw how proud they were that they were serving their country," Caryl said. "I realized that these soldiers were still just kids like my boy and they enjoyed all of the same things like candy, chips, movies, video games that they enjoyed in high school."

Caryl felt convicted and was spurred to action. If she could raise the morale one even iota, the tangible gestures would be a success. She scoured the Internet and came across www.anysoldier.com.

"This was perfect for what I wanted to do," she said. "I didn't want to donate to a charity where I was not sure if the donations were actually getting where they needed to be."

Caryl, Island County Central Services director, and Diana Vaughn, Central Services assistant director, teamed up and shouldered all responsibility, in the process spearheading an island-wide effort that has snowballed.

"We made up some pamphlets and passed them around to family and friends that might be interested in assisting and it just took off from there," Caryl said.

Specialized supplies for females such as lotions, lip balm and shampoo are at a premium and often difficult to obtain once supplies diminish. Socks are also a popular request by all soldiers, as well as small stuffed toys, candy suckers and school supplies that men and women can use to brighten the days of local children they are serving.

Caryl began sending packages to soldiers overseas last November, and in the past year has shipped hundreds of boxes loaded with all types of non-perishable snack food, toothpaste, lotions, makeup, shaving gel, DVDs, games, books and, of course, socks.

"We have sent over 200 boxes since November," she said. "I try to send four to six boxes a week to different units. I have sent to the Army, Navy and Marines."

The county employee of 28 years has turned the project into a substantial production, converting a guest space at her home into a virtual commissary to house all of the goods. Caryl dutifully sends emails as often as possible to donors, updating the generous people on the project and attaching emails or letters received from some grateful soldiers.

"I receive many letters and emails from the troops and have made quite a few friends overseas," she said. "I don't expect responses. In fact, my response rate is about 30 percent, but I am thrilled when I do hear from them."

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