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Small Charities Show Support by Fulfilling Troops' Wish Lists

By **STEPHANIE STROM** Published: December 21, 2004

Andi Grant's modest 1,100-square-foot home in Connecticut is overflowing with beef jerky, tuna in pouches, socks, DVD's and other goods that she and a band of volunteers stuff in care packages for American troops.

She does not take everything. She checks all packaged food, for instance, to make sure there has been no tampering. She will not forward pen pal letters, she said, because they create a sense of obligation and because too many are written by women looking for a spouse.

"If it's pork, we can't send it because it might end up in the hands of kids who aren't supposed to eat it for religious reasons," Mrs. Grant said. "And I don't accept hotel samples because they're too small, and I just don't think it's right to send these guys freebies someone just happened to pick up. These guys deserve the best."

Whenever she can, she fills special requests, having tracked down an Xbox video game player for a group of soldiers in Afghanistan and Dial soap for another soldier.

Her own wish list this Christmas is for warehouse space along with money for postage. "I'm a neat freak, and stuff is piling up," she said.

Mrs. Grant founded Give 2 The Troops in 2002 after her husband, Brian, a Marine reservist, was summoned for duty in Bahrain. (He returned safely.) What she saw as a useful distraction for herself and her son, Ryan, now 12, has mushroomed into a registered charity that sends about 160 60-pound care packages a month - except this one, when it will send more than 200. Each package contains letters from schoolchildren and contributions of goods collected by schools, churches and individuals.

Give 2 The Troops is one of several grass-roots charities, like Adopt-A-Sniper, Hugs From Home and Operation Paperback, that have sprung up as Americans clamor for ways to demonstrate their support for soldiers in Iraq, Afghanistan, Kosovo, Somalia and other hot spots. In some cases, they are providing assistance that larger, established charities have found difficult to deliver. Donors used to be able to send their gifts to military units, but things changed after the 2001 terrorist attacks and the anthrax scare.

Now care packages must be sent to a specific soldier at a specific address. And contributions to charities are often in goods rather than cash, intended to improve life in the field. The small groups tend to collect the names of a few soldiers and ask them after they have received packages to spread the word to other troops that they could contact the charities if they wanted gifts.



Michael Stravato for The New York Times
Brian Sains, a member of a SWAT team in Port Arthur, Texas, and program coordinator for Adopt-A-Sniper, models the body armor plate carrier. He sends similar items to United States military snipers in Iraq.

The American Red Cross, which offers emergency communications and financial assistance to troops abroad, stopped sending care packages after the military raised concerns about security and restricted transportation, a spokeswoman said, although individual chapters have found other ways to help.

The U.S.O., best known for its celebrity shows to entertain troops stationed abroad, gives care packages to soldiers as they ship out but says it, too, cannot send goodies abroad because of military restrictions.

"There's some confusion about what can be done," said Edward A. Powell, the U.S.O.'s president and chief executive.

Mr. Powell expressed frustration at the robust sales of magnetic ribbons symbolizing support for the troops and similar items, even though the U.S.O. and other groups sometimes receive part of the proceeds.

"People want to show their support for the troops," he said, "but the troops aren't going to see those ribbons unless they come home. They do know when we show up with Robin Williams or Ted Nugent."

Restrictions on the movement of goods have stymied many willing donors. The Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, the agency charged with redeveloping the World Trade Center site, had a luncheon for the families of Sept. 11 victims shortly after the war in Iraq started and asked them to bring things that could be sent to the troops.

But the development group quickly encountered the same roadblocks as big organizations, said Walter Noonan, whose son Robert died in the north tower of the trade center. The items it had collected languished in a spare room at the trade center site until Mr. Noonan discovered Mrs. Grant.

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"There was a tremendous amount of stuff," Mr. Noonan said, "but we didn't know what to do with it. Then I heard about Andi and took it all to her, and she sent it all out herself, using her own money, which was a big financial burden."

After numerous public inquiries, the Southern Nevada chapter of the Red Cross set up a program to send telephone cards to the troops.

"We were getting phone calls from the community saying we want to help service members during the holidays, but we can't find a way to do it," said April Mastroluca, director of financial development for the Southern Nevada chapter.

The day before Thanksgiving, the Greater Carolinas chapter of the Red Cross in Charlotte, N.C., started collecting toys and other gifts for more than 350 families in the area who have a parent deployed abroad. About 400 children will receive at least two gifts through the program, said Louise St. Germain, the chapter's public affairs officer.

"It's been just incredible," Ms. St. Germain said.

Carolyn Blashek founded Operation Gratitude, a West Coast version of Give 2 The Troops, after she, too, grew frustrated over how hard it was to help men and women in the service directly.

"I didn't know anyone over there," Mrs. Blashek said, "so I started asking people in the grocery store and on the street for names and addresses."

The day the war in Iraq broke out, she sent four care packages to female soldiers in Kuwait who had run out of feminine supplies. In them, Mrs. Blashek included a letter telling them how she had obtained their names and invited them to tell any other service member who needed something to send her an e-mail message.

Her in-box began filling up, as word spread among the troops, and people in her community began asking to get involved, which led to a collection drive. "Within three weeks of the war breaking out," Mrs. Blashek said, "my living room was covered top to bottom and end to end with donations."

Eventually, she came in contact with Staff Sgt. Elizabeth Cowie, who was doing the same thing through the California Army National Guard Armory, which served as a handy warehouse. They merged their operations and set a goal of sending out 1,500 packages last Christmas. They shipped more than 7,000, and this year, they are aiming for more than 20,000.

"Word got out; hundreds of volunteers turned out to stuff boxes," Mrs. Blashek said. "Other units were seeing what we were sending over and asking for our help. It just snowballed." The packages are typically stuffed with Slim Jims, foot powder, CD's, playing cards, disposable cameras, crossword puzzle books and Beanie Babies, which the troops distribute to children. Corporations are even sending pallet loads of their products to the armory.

Many of the organizers of the charities end up paying a substantial amount of the postage themselves.

Adopt-A-Sniper's care packages often include some of the same products, but its goal is to supply snipers assigned to military units with specialized equipment that is hard to obtain through the ordinary requisition and supply process, like wind meters, laser range finders and special lightweight helmets.

"Special Forces, the Navy Seals, they have what they need," said Brian K. Sains, a sniper on the police SWAT team in Port Arthur, Tex., who created the charity with several friends around the country who are also law enforcement snipers. "But in the National Guard, some armored units and Stryker brigades, snipers are a new thing for them, and they may not have money allotted for their special needs because they're unfamiliar with them."

Postage is the biggest challenge for his charity, running to \$1,600 over the last three weeks, Mr. Sains said.

"Money helps us the most because we have to pay shipping on this stuff," he said, noting that Adopt-A-Sniper had survived the scrutiny of a military investigator dispatched by United States Central Command to make sure it was not sending weapons abroad.

Mrs. Blashek and Mrs. Grant echoed Mr. Sains's wish. Give 2 The Troops receives about \$20,000 worth of goods a month, Mrs. Grant said, but "I'm lucky if I can raise \$1,000 a month."