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ComPadres Bring Comfort to U.S. Soldiers

by Beth Hackett

The reality of the war and what U.S. troops are enduring overseas has affected the hearts of many people. Among them are local residents who are now striving to make a difference for the troops.

The ComPadres, an organization that supports the chaplains and troops based in Iraq and Afghanistan, accepts donations from anyone looking to do whatever they can for the U.S. troops abroad.

John Blaney, of Mt. Greenwood, was watching the news one evening when he learned three more U.S. Marines had been killed. "I felt like I had to do something," Blaney said. "So I went into work the next day and said, 'Listen guys, let's see if we can put together some care packages for the Marines.'"

Blaney heard about the ComPadres from Jim Kelly, a Marine and son of Ceil Kelly, a member of ComPadres, while they were working out one day. Kelly told Blaney that members of St. Cajetan Roman Catholic Church developed the ComPadres organization after the Rev. John Barkemeyer, former St. Cajetan pastor, resigned from his pastorate and joined the Army as a chaplain.

Blaney, who grew up in St. Cajetan parish, said he knows Barkemeyer personally, and when he heard of his decision to become chaplain for the Army, he was inspired. "I thought, 'What a great man to serve his country, his troops and basically anyone who needs it,'" Blaney said. He decided the ComPadres was a good organization to send the donations he planned to collect.

One of Blaney's co-workers at the Chicago Department of General Services is a Marine, so he was able to suggest items he was sure the men and women overseas would need. That was invaluable, organizers said. "He knew the general ideas of what we were sending over," said Missy Rossi, a member of ComPadres. "It's a nice master list of appropriate items."

Blaney and co-workers put flyers in the building's elevators and boxes outside each department at work, and, he said, within weeks the boxes were filled. Blaney's efforts garnered 26 boxes filled with food snacks, toiletries, entertainment items, writing utensils, T-shirts, American flags and many more items, which are expected to arrive in Iraq this week.

Tim Traynor, ComPadres founder, said organizers were lucky Blaney's co-workers knew what to donate this time, but typically monetary donations are the best since the Marines' needs change on a weekly, sometimes daily, basis. "[The ComPadres] are committed to staying flexible and responding to whatever pressing needs are deemed most urgent," Traynor said.

Communicating with Barkemeyer 5-6 times a week via e-mail to ask what the troops want or need at that time, Traynor decided to ask Barkemeyer a few weeks ago what he could use personally, for himself. "If you run into some cigars, I suppose that would be nice,"

Barkemeyer responded. Besides enjoying an occasional cigar to relax, Barkemeyer told Traynor that people tend to see him as more accessible and less like a chaplain when he is smoking one. Traynor went to the Beverly Cigar Company and asked for something "cool and smooth," purchased 25 cigars and sent them to Barkemeyer.

A couple nights later, Barkemeyer said he was enjoying one of those cigars while watching the sunset when a Marine approached him. He offered the man a cigar, and they sat and "chewed the fat" for a while. The next morning that Marine showed up at Barkemeyer's office to talk about post-traumatic stress issues he was dealing with, as he had just witnessed two of his friends die. "Without those cigars, the man wouldn't have approached and talked to [Barkemeyer]," Traynor said. "And that's what it is for Fr. John; he connects with the troops on a lot of different levels."

The aim of The ComPadres is similar to that of Barkemeyer, to bring comfort to the soldiers in as many ways as possible. Traynor and Rossi said they are amazed with the contributions that come from people all over who want to help by any means possible.

Elizabeth Mannix, co-owner of Chicago Lockbox, 3400 W. 111th St., prepares and wraps packages, free of charge, for anyone sending anything overseas to the troops. "She helps everybody," Traynor said. "She's an unsung hero."

Kate Hall, Mannix's sister and co-owner of Chicago Lockbox, said many people were coming into the store to wrap and ship packages to Marines overseas. "Unfortunately, we can't ship to the Marines overseas because of the P.O. box system," Hall said. "So we decided we had to do something as our own way of giving back, and that was wrapping for free." Hall invites anyone sending packages to soldiers to come in, and the staff will be more than happy to help.

"It's just interesting," Traynor said. "It's John Blaney; it's the Beverly Cigar Store; it's the Lockbox; there's a lot of great aspects to this organization."

Local churches have been displaying ComPadres advertisements in their bulletins, but most contributors have learned about the organization through word of mouth and its Web site.

"Nobody is doing what the ComPadres are doing," Barkemeyer recently wrote. "This is by far the most creative and direct support program that exists for the troops."

Monetary donations can be easily arranged through PayPal, an online payment source, which can be accessed through the ComPadres' Web site at www.thecompadres.org.