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EDITOR'S PICK

FEATURED

TOP STORY

Volunteers pack 226 holiday care packages for troops

By KATHY SHWIFF Editor 22 hrs ago

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ROSELAND – Brett D'Alessandro received a surprise holiday care package in 2012 when he was serving in Afghanistan after his aunt Lisa gave his name and address to Kathy Pigott.

Pigott, a Roseland resident, has been organizing the mailing of care packages to active-duty military members for the past 18 years. She started the project with her daughter Nicole in their home.

On Wednesday, Dec. 4, about 200 volunteers helped pack 226 boxes with nonperishable food, toiletries, holiday cards made by schoolchildren and other items from noon to 7 p.m. in the community room of the Roseland First Aid Squad building.

Last year, 165 boxes were mailed to those serving around the world, about three times the number sent in 2017.

This year, Pigott joined with Backpacks for Life, a nonprofit started by D'Alessandro in 2014 after he met a fellow veteran who was homeless during the winter in Rhode Island.

In addition to providing backpacks containing T-shirts, socks, warming layers and toiletries to homeless veterans, the Verona-based organization helps them connect with services, such as resume assistance and financial guidance, said Alexa Modero, who started it with D'Alessandro.

Each of the care packages put together Dec. 4 contained information about Backpacks for Life so the recipients would know about the organization before they might need it, Modero said.

Pigott said she has been working since August to gather the items to go in the packages. This year, the donated items included small stuffed animals, which were requested by previous recipients so soldiers can them to children in areas where they are serving. Laundry detergent and Amazon gift cards also were added this year.

Any items left over will go to food pantries in Caldwell, West Orange and at St. Thomas More Church in Fairfield as well as to St. John's Soup Kitchen in Newark.

Volunteers included students from Roseland and Fairfield schools, senior citizens from throughout the area, groups of Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, and members of the Roseland Police Department.

About 1:30 p.m., nine students who are members of Noecker Cares, a community service group at the Roseland grades K-6 school, were checking for staples in holiday cards made by students in Roseland, Fairfield, Verona and West Orange. Staples cannot be sent in the boxes.

"Giving back to the community is one of our goals ... helping others whether it be in our own town or overseas," said Noecker teacher Christina Melillo.

Joanie Brickman had brought about 300 pounds of Halloween candy collected at West Milford elementary schools for the packages.

Each year, Pigott and Suzanne Pennell of West Orange ask local residents for the names and addresses of military members. Using social media, they also solicit donations of items and cash to pay for the postage, which is nearly \$20 a box.

People who made a memorial donation for postage received a thank-you letter that included the name of the care-package recipient. Donations came from Florida, Tennessee, Louisiana, Arizona, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Alabama and Rhode Island as well as New Jersey and totaled \$4,212, Pigott said.

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Volunteers pack holiday boxes for the troops

