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Sharing our HOPE



Operation Homeland Support

BY ESTHER R. KNOTT

When you meet Anne Carlson, you wouldn't guess the influence she is having in her home town of Berrien Springs, Michigan, and in the Middle East. This quiet, unassuming young woman works as a physical therapist during the day, spreading her own version of warmth and light. At night, she's busy with *Operation Homeland Support*.

Anne is the sister of Sgt. Ryan G. Carlson, stationed with the 1st Armored Division in Baghdad, Iraq. Anne has experienced a lot of stress with her brother being stationed in Iraq. To help her cope with the stress, she began sending her brother a care package every week. Every time Ryan received a package, he knew of her love and support. Anne assumed that every soldier had that same kind of support coming from home. This was not so.

Operation Homeland Support began quietly when Ann and Ryan's mother, Sue Carlson, began to hear of soldiers who were not getting *any* mail. Sue then began to communicate with other *Proud Army Moms* (PAM) and became part of a network of sharing names to adopt among military families. Sue passed on names to her daughter, Anne. As Sue and Anne adopted soldiers, it was communicated back through the military grapevine to the "adopted" soldiers that they could safely expect mail from Anne and Sue. The five names they began with soon expanded to include 30

other men in Ryan's unit.

The news of what they were doing spread to the community. I shared with our congregation at Pioneer Memorial Church about Anne's part in supporting our soldiers, and people from church volunteered time and items.



Anne Carlson carefully chooses the items she will include in her next care package to a serviceman or woman serving in Iraq. She is holding one of the most sought-after items, a battery-powered fan.

Anne's neighbor connected her with the Berrien Springs American Legion, where she gave short presentations to the men of the Post and the Ladies Auxiliary. They provided funds for fans and care-box items. Co-workers at Lakeland Hospital, where Anne works, also began to contribute items for care boxes. One of the doctors who had been very vocal against the war purchased four fans for the soldiers. The fans are battery operated and can last 400 hours on one set of D cells. These have been invaluable, as the temperatures reach above 100 degrees and there is no electricity.

Anne has raised hundreds of dollars toward this project.

She keeps meticulous records of the donations and each item the soldiers receive. Thanks to the generosity of the community, Anne is able to ship each soldier a package every one or two weeks. Most of the care packages contain simple items, such as books, granola bars, Pop Tarts, nuts, disposable cameras, writing supplies, travel games, powdered drink mix, the portable fans, and other items.

Each soldier has also been sent a small New Testament, compliments of Bonnie Lloyd of Pioneer Memorial Church, who provided the money, and Gary Hillebert, Berrien Springs ABC manager, who helped with special ordering.

For the most part, the soldiers need simple support, to know that they are cared about and remembered, and especially that they are prayed for. When Ryan contacts his family from Baghdad, he always requests prayer.

Because of Anne's decision to get involved, several communities have been inspired to participate. Young military men and woman in the Middle East feel the love and support of their fellow Americans. As we pray for them and show tangible love, we hope they will learn of a God who also came to set the oppressed free.

Esther R. Knott is an associate pastor at the Pioneer Memorial Church at Andrews University.