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Irish Hills' top citizen helps troops in Iraq

Julie Watrous prepares packages to be sent to troops overseas. Watrous and other members of the All Saints Episcopal Church in Brooklyn have sent more than 300 boxes filled with items to U.S. troops serving in Iraq. -- Telegram photo by Rachel Ingle

'O'Reilly Family Reunion' provides a fun food fight

Cast members

Irish Hills' top citizen helps troops in Iraq

By David Frownfelder -- Daily Telegram Staff Writer

BROOKLYN -- The 2004 Citizen of the Year in the Irish Hills wants U.S. military personnel in Iraq to know they are not forgotten. Julie Watrous was honored March 12 at the Brooklyn/Irish Hills Chamber of Commerce annual dinner meeting for her efforts in helping soldiers enjoy a few creature comforts while serving in an inhospitable climate.

"Julie started sending cards to soldiers," said Linda Reynolds, chamber executive director. "Then she started going to service clubs, joined Kiwanis and now they send boxes to the soldiers through anysoldier.com."

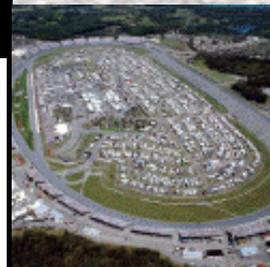
"I found it by fluke," Watrous said. "I was just looking on the Internet for ways to help our troops and found this site where this guy and his son had found people to be contacts for soldiers who don't otherwise get these things."

Every month, Watrous and her mother, Cindy Bacon, gather up the donated items and ship them off to the troops. What started as a small effort for a few soldiers has blossomed into more than 300 bundles heading from Brooklyn to the Middle East.

Bacon has recruited many businesses in Brooklyn to serve as drop-off points for personal items such as shampoo, soap, books, magazines and other everyday items that the troops might not otherwise have access to.

"It's a fun, family thing to do," she said. "When we're out shopping, if we've got an extra \$10 or so, we pick up a few things for the troops."

She noted that anysoldier.com has grown immensely in the past two years. It began with seven people serving as contacts for 14 soldiers in Iraq, and now



perform while the audience enjoys its meal at "The O'Reilly Family Reunion" staged by the Croswell Opera House. -- Telegram photo by Lad Strayer

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has more than 3,300 people serving more than 30,000 troops.

The biggest expense has been mailing the boxes. With that in mind, she addressed several service clubs in Brooklyn, and the Kiwanis decided to take on the effort as a community project.

Watrous was so grateful she joined the club in October, she said. She likes the camaraderie of the club and the community service the members provide.

"I'm kind of a behind-the-scenes person," she said. "I'm not much for heading committees, but I like to do the work."

Watrous and her husband, Brad, have lived in Brooklyn for about 15 years. The Monroe native has worked at Radio Shack for the past five years.

She was surprised by the Citizen of the Year award, she said. Her boss, Pam Johnson, asked her to go to the banquet to represent the company and to help celebrate the 25th anniversary of the chamber.

"I asked my husband if he wanted to go and he sort of said no," Watrous said. "A couple of weeks later, he asked 'When was that dinner?' and said he'd like to go. While they were handing out the awards, they were just getting to the Citizen of the Year and I had cracked a joke. We were laughing while the speaker was telling the audience about sending these packages to soldiers. Then I realized, 'They're talking about me.' "

While she enjoys her moment in the spotlight, Watrous is quick to point out that the spotlight should shine on the troops in Iraq who are just doing their duty. She added that people should not just send cards and gifts during Christmas, but should continue all year long.

"My Mom and I sent over 2,000 cards last Christmas season. The cards and thank-you letters I get back from these people are so touching," she said. "I get four-page letters just for sending a card."

She is happy that the contributions she collects for anysoldier.com do not come from strong-arming local businesses, but from people who just want to make life a little more bearable for the troops. The rewards are priceless, she said.

"(The Citizen of the Year) is such an honor. I'm still not believing it," she said. "But, doing these things for the soldiers is rewarding. It's not political, it's our guys, and anybody can get involved."