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Rangers backing soldiers Group plans two benefits for troops

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VIRGINIA — Ashley Pilney hasn't even been deployed yet. The Eveleth graduate is still in her first year of a two-year nuclear power program.

But her enlistment in the Navy has already rallied a group of Iron Rangers to support soldiers overseas — anonymous strangers — with a show of care and thankfulness, and the fulfillment of a few wish lists in time for the holidays.

The group, headed by Pilney's mother, Pam Pilney, will hold two benefits Saturday to raise enough money to send 500 care packages to soldiers serving in harm's way around the world. Pam Pilney, administrative assistant at the Laurentian Chamber of Commerce, has teamed up with three other soldiers' mothers and one wife of a soldier to coordinate the events.

"Their sons and husbands get things from home, of course, but there are soldiers in their units who don't," Pam Pilney said. "We're helping soldiers who don't have any moral support from home. Could you imagine being far away from home, in a strange place, a hostile place, and watching your friends get packages from home while you don't? It would be tough."

Pilney and her group will send the packages via AnySoldier.com, which is facilitated by a network of volunteer soldiers who distribute the letters and boxes to the soldiers in their units who never or rarely get mail from home. The group learned of AnySoldier.com through some of Ashley Pilney's friends, and thought it was a worthwhile cause.

The fundraisers are set for noon to 4 p.m. Saturday at Olcott Park in Virginia and for all day Saturday at Boondocks in Forbes. The Olcott Park event will be family-oriented, with games and prizes, a Sponge Bob moonbounce, a raffle, letter writing for the children, a silent auction with kids' items, and pizza. Boondocks' benefit will include tournaments, silent and live auctions, music, a raffle, souvenirs for sale, food and prizes.

Pilney hopes for a good turnout to have fun support the soldiers, but warned that the fundraisers are not a forum for pro- or anti-war speeches.

"This is not a political issue," Pam Pilney said. "This is for the benefit of the men and women serving in harm's way. It is for their moral support."

All proceeds from both events will go toward packaging and postage for the care packages. Pilney estimates the cost to send 500 bundles will be about \$4,000, she said.

"We've had a great response so far from businesses and the public," Pam Pilney said. Their donations include both auction and raffle items for the benefits, and wish list items for the care packages. The big-ticket raffle prizes include an ATV from Five Seasons Sports Center, a large television from Perpich TV & Music, a car stereo from Bill's TV & Auto Sound, a Play and Stay package from Fortune Bay Resort Casino and a hot tub suite package from the Americinn.



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Raffle tickets will be available at both benefits and other locations, which can be identified with a call to the Laurentian Chamber of Commerce. The drawing will be held at 11:30 p.m. at the Boondocks benefit Saturday. Winners need not be present to collect prizes, Pilney said.

A silent auction will also be held at both locations. The Boondocks benefit will feature big-ticket items in the silent auction and smaller prizes in a live auction, which will be interspersed throughout the evening hours, whenever the live bands take a break.

People may also make care package donations at either of the benefits, at the Laurentian Chamber of Commerce or Blockbuster in Virginia, or they may call the chamber for other locations. The soldiers' wish lists and guidelines on what is acceptable to send is posted at AnySoldier.com.

"If anybody wants to send something on their own, great," Pam Pilney added. "You don't need to have a benefit to use the Web site."

Pilney also needs volunteers to help run games and tournaments; sell raffle tickets and food during the benefits; and, later, to help package donations, bring them to the post office and fill out customs forms for each box. She can be reached at the Laurentian Chamber of Commerce, at 741-2717.

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