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Week in Review

Friday



- New cancer center a high-tech marvel

Thursday



- Nail spill snarls U.S. 2
- Naked or not, pigs lose in court
- Snohomish loses out on dinner train - for now

Wednesday



- Davis welcomed home
- Police nab three big-time shoplifters
- City wants Silver Lake to be better for boating

Tuesday



- 12 fresh places to get groceries
- County property values pass \$105 billion
- Trail walkers, beware of bears

Monday

Local News

Published: Saturday, June 16, 2007

Their words never failed him

Langley students meet their sailor after year of letters

By Kaitlin Manry
Herald Writer

LANGLEY - The letters came.

They came when he was new in Afghanistan, struggling to adjust to 120-degree temperatures and rocky, mountainous terrain.

They came when he was homesick, missing his wife and four adolescent daughters.

They came on Christmas, Valentine's Day and Easter - when he needed them the most.

On Thursday - finally - after a year's worth of letters, he came.

Naval Chief Petty Officer Ray Griffith arrived at Langley Middle School on Thursday to meet the sixth- and seventh-grade strangers who faithfully wrote to him during his year in Qalat, Afghanistan.

On Friday, his pen pals gave him a hero's welcome, complete with a naval color guard, a proclamation declaring this week Ray Griffith Week in Langley and the gift of a wooden pencil and pen made by the school's shop class.

"Every time I opened a box from the U.S., that gave me a piece of home I didn't have," Griffith told the students. "You guys made home come to me. ... I'm here in person to say a simple one thing. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you."

Before the war, Griffith, 41, had no connection to Whidbey Island. He was firefighter from Albuquerque, N.M., and a member of the Naval Reserve. After he was sent to Afghanistan to train Afghan troops, the students found his name on a Web site - anysoldier.com - and started writing.

In exchange for the handwritten letters, Griffith wrote to the students.

He e-mailed them photos of himself in military fatigues and pictures of children too poor for shoes.

He told them about the mountains that surrounded his camp, and the military interpreters who helped him find his way in a foreign land. He sent them an American flag that flew at his base. It now hangs, framed in a shadow box, at the school.

They brought home to him. And, in turn, he brought the war to them. "I'd see the articles in the paper about people being killed over there and I'd get really upset," said sixth-grader Stephanie Otteman, who organized a bake sale to send

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Elizabeth Armstrong / The Herald
Kate Ewing, 12, a seventh-grader at Langley Middle School, shares a laugh with her houseguest and new friend Chief Petty Officer Ray Griffith during a school assembly in his honor Friday.

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- Shoppers are hungry for organic foods
- Store brands often cost you less
- Marysville could grow by 20,000 in one swoop

Sunday



- Kids shakin' and movin'
- Price check: Where to find the best grocery deals
- Teen's death at Sultan rail crossing ignites safety effort

Saturday



- Student, teacher publish, then pay
- Grandma's a grad, too
- With math out of equation, most kids pass WASL

Griffith and his troops snacks, movies and sandals for the barefoot children they met. "I thought, 'Oh my gosh. It could be one of the people I know.' "

From May 2006 to May 2007, when Griffith returned to his life as a firefighter in Albuquerque, sixth-grade teacher Rachel Kizer periodically mailed him packs of 30 to 40 student letters.

He'd open the letters slowly, savoring each word. He'd set aside some for the inevitable days when no mail would come and would give others to soldiers without any mail to read.

Students told him about their island, about the movies they saw on Friday nights and the latest soccer games.

They drew him pictures of flowers and flags.

They told him they were proud of him. They asked him to come visit.

This week, he finally did.

After just a few weeks at home with his family, Griffith boarded a plane and flew to Seattle with a ticket paid for by the Langley Middle School Associated Student Body.

He was met at the airport by a handful of cheering students, and stayed in the homes of his pen pals.

At Friday's assembly, the school band serenaded him, playing "Anchors Aweigh" and "The Star-Spangled Banner."

Principal Rod Merrell named Griffith the "Cougar of the Week." And the entire student body stood up to applaud the man who, over the course of a year, had become more than a friend. He had become a hero.

Griffith didn't say much.

He couldn't.

"I did everything in my power to fight back the tears," he said, red-eyed in his crisp white uniform, decorated with dozens of colorful ribbons. "I didn't want to cry in front of the kids. The butterflies and the overwhelming feeling I have in my body - I don't have the words. They were so sincere."

Griffith didn't understand why everyone - students, teachers, parents and town leaders - were so nice, so grateful.

For them, the reason was simple.

He came.

Reporter Kaitlin Manry: 425-339-3292 or kmanry@heraldnet.com.

TODAY'S STORIES MOST E-MAILED

- New cancer center a high-tech marvel
- 12 fresh places to get groceries
- Trail walkers, beware of bears
- Ultimate Legend
- Student, teacher publish, then pay
- Taking his brew to a new level
- Property values: \$105 billion
- Making the most from a minimum
- Marysville could grow by 20,000 in one swoop
- Fighting back

[See all popular e-mailed stories]

ENTERPRISE NEWSPAPERS SNOHOMISH COUNTY BUSINESS JOURNAL

- When it's too good to be true
- It's a race for a seat on the council
- Experts: preparation, awareness key to avoiding scams
- Animal control officer nabs purse-snatcher
- French, Knorr and Maynard to challenge in Terrace races
- Quiet campaign looms in Brier
- Private talks go public

[See all Enterprise stories]

The Enterprise
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