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Woman wants group of 60 deployed Marines to have best holiday possible

By Josh Lanier

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In a converted gym at her Mount Pleasant home called the "workshop," Tracy Ginder is struggling to create the best Christmas for all of her 60 "kids."

Boxes stacked in the floor are overflowing with coffee and food items, wrapped gifts and cards, all waiting to be sent to the family members she's never met.

She's nearly completed her goal: supplying Christmas halfway



Tracy Ginder holds a bear she plans to send, along with Christmas presents, to a group of Marines stationed in Iraq for the holidays.

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Through constant e-mails and letters, Ginder has adopted a group of Marines serving in Iraq and has taken it upon herself to supply Christmas to the 56 men and four women. She met the servicemen and women through a Web site (www.anysoldier.com) dedicated to connecting strangers with soldiers.

"It's become my addiction," she said. "It just started with me writing thank you letters and little e-mails and it just became all of this."

Ginder has done much of the work on her own, but said she's had a lot of support from friends and family who have helped her raise money and find supplies for the Christmas packages. With their help, she only needs 15 gifts and the money to ship the 12 to 15 boxes to Iraq, which equates to a little more than \$200.

Ginder works at the Cabarrus Health Alliance and spends her lunch hours typing funny e-mails and correspondences, or buying supplies for the monthly care packages she sends, something she began in January. She writes handwritten notes with all of her gifts and packages.

"Some of the guys write me back, others don't. Some of them will e-mail me some photos of them 'goofing off' in their free time or pictures of things they've seen," Ginder said. "People sometimes look at the military like a machine, but these are people working very hard at difficult jobs and I just want to let them know how much they mean to us."

Ginder said that she wants the troops' Christmas presents to be interesting and not necessarily essential things.

"We're sending things like hand-held video games, food and things that remind them of home. They're not essential items; they're just things that will make them happy," Ginder said. "You don't want to open a Christmas gift and have a razor or something like that, you

want something fun.”

Ginder maintains constant contact with most of the troops and nearly daily contact with their commanding officer, GnySgt Thomas Akins.

“Thank you will never be enough but the best we can do from here. The support packages are making a difference and it will be even more crucial over the holidays,” Akins said in an e-mail. “It may seem as simple as throwing a few things in a box and mailing them off to most. But for these Marines mail could be the difference between a good day and a bad day.”

Ginder doesn’t know where the troops are stationed and she said she doesn’t want to know. She said she doesn’t like to ask too many probing questions. She also doesn’t watch the news in case she hears of the death of “one of her kids.”

Ginder began her interest with America’s fighting troops during junior high when she was able to correspond with a soldier and meet him after his return from Desert Storm.

“She’s always been like this,” said her mother, Debbie Fox, laughing. “She was in my Girl Scout troop and we started a thing where we assigned each girl a soldier. The girls would write letters and send notes to their soldier ... I think it left her with a good impression of the men and women fighting for this country and a nice, warm and fuzzy feeling.”

Fox said she worked to instill a strong sense of patriotism in her children and a desire to give back.

“I think it stuck with (Tracy),” she said. “I think that’s pretty obvious.”

Along with the self-imposed obligations with the troops, Ginder and her family are helping a needy family in the area for Christmas.

She has also adopted neglected, abused or stray animals.

At current count, she has seven dogs, three horses, guinea hogs, ducks, rabbits, fainting goats, cats and one beta fish.

“I get a lot of e-mails from soldiers asking ‘how are things down on the farm?’” she said. “I have a disease I called ‘being nice.’ It drives my husband crazy but I feel like I have to give back.”

For more information on Ginder’s work or to contact her, visit <http://>

www.afreedomhorse.com.

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