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Thursday February 08, 2007

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CHIEFTAIN PHOTO/TRACY HARMON

Roger Parsons adds candies to a care package for soldiers as his wife, Kelli, prepares to add lollipops and their Dalmatian Daisy sniffs out the beef jerky.

Injured former cop helps soldiers overseas

By TRACY HARMON
THE PUEBLO CHIEFTAIN

CANON CITY - A local former police officer who was paralyzed because of a horrible accident and lost his job has every right to feel sorry for himself.

But he's not.

He's too busy helping others.

Roger Parsons, 43, was off-duty from his job as a Canon City police officer May 10, 2005, riding his motorcycle on U.S. 50 when a pickup truck attempting to cross all four lanes passed in front of him. Parsons laid his motorcycle down on its side as he tried to avoid hitting the pickup truck, but he slid under the truck and the rear wheel went over his chest.

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Parsons was carried away from the accident scene with 16 shattered ribs, most broken in several places, three breaks in his left arm, a broken shoulder blade, a broken collarbone, a bunch of cracked discs, one completely pulverized disc in his spine, a head injury and two flattened lungs.

Six months later he was fired from his job with the police department after more than 11 years on the force, because he can no longer perform his duties.

Since that day that forever changed his life, he has been present at every court hearing for Karen Price, 51, who is charged with misdemeanor careless driving causing injury and failure to yield at a stop sign in connection with the accident, a case which is scheduled to go to trial April 2 in Salida before a jury of six. In addition, Parsons' attorney is preparing to file a federal lawsuit against the city for wrongful termination.

Other than those two pending issues, Parsons has moved on. He is working toward his bachelor's degree in criminal justice, taking on-line classes through an accredited program; he said he finds that far more challenging than he thought it would be.

And he's developed a new passion - helping soldiers who are overseas. It all started when his wife, Kelli, wanted to send a package to a friend in the military.

"She did not know what to send so she got online and found anysolider.com, which gave her ideas of what to send. Then she noticed a list of soldiers and what they need - some just want a letter," Parsons said.

Being the adept negotiator through eBay that he is, Parsons started getting items for soldier care packages from the wholesale lot. Plus, Kelli Parsons loves to shop and the dollar stores have provided a lot of good supplies.

The couple's spare bedroom started filling up with beef jerky, cases of flavored coffees, lollipops, hard candies, cheese-filled pretzels, individually wrapped circus peanuts, hats, puzzle books, miniature Nerf footballs, stationary, comedy movie DVDs and the like. Kelli adds letters and pictures for a personal touch.

"One letter is about my situation," Parsons said.

Each carefully assembled box is then mailed, via the U.S. Postal Service flat rate of \$8.10 per box to soldiers who are stationed away from home, sometimes Iraq, sometimes Afghanistan, sometimes other countries.

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"We're getting close to 40 boxes, maybe more, that we've sent," Parsons said. "I was not expecting such a response."

The couple started getting letters, cards, even a cell-phone call from the soldiers who are getting their care packages.

"Sometimes we forget why we're dodging bullets and constantly watching our backs, and you're the reason, your generosity despite personal hardships, your incredible faith in the greater good and your selflessness," wrote Juliene Crisostomo, who sent a picture of herself and two other soldiers she shared her goodies with.

"Your pictures show a happy family. With all you have to handle in your life and you still took the time to think of us - thank you," wrote Sgt. Major Rebecca Harting, a National Guard soldier.

"Your efforts have boosted morale and brought a sense of home to the Marines," wrote K.A. Kempster of Combat Logistics Battalion 1.

The phone call came earlier this week. It was from Sgt. Randall Archie from Raceland, Ky., who is stationed near Baghdad, out of Fort Hood, Texas.

"It wasn't a real clear call so it took me awhile to figure out who it was. Then, it was hard to believe he was calling from that distance. I know it can't be cheap.

"I'm not sure how to describe it, but shortly after we started talking, Kelli came home and she did say it almost made her cry," Parsons said.

Archie told Parsons that whenever he gets a box, he gives the soldiers who don't have family the first chance to take what they need then he shares items with the rest of the unit.

"He said I am an inspiration to them and talked about how terrible it is, especially when they are on their second or third tour. His unit is responsible for walking along roads in the Baghdad area looking for improvised explosive devices, so I know that can't be fun," Parsons said.

According to the Web site, "Sgt. Brian Horn from LaPlata, Md., an army infantry soldier with the 173rd Airborne Brigade, was in the Kirkuk area of Iraq when he started the idea to help care for his soldiers. He agreed to distribute packages that came to him with 'Attn: Any Soldier' in his address to soldiers who didn't get mail. He later completed a tour in Afghanistan and is now home, but anysoldier.com continues larger than ever."

The effort was expanded in 2004 to include any member, of any of the armed forces in harm's way.

The Web page reports the program is, "Helping approximately 119,057 service members with 3,826 military contacts."

So each box sent to a soldier is addressed to the specific soldier, then Any Soldier, followed by the address.

"If the person you send it to gets transferred, the mailroom can give it to someone else, someone is going to get it," Parsons explained.

"When you start reading about these guys online you start thinking about what they do and it's addicting. Sometimes they just want simple things like gum or snacks," Parsons said, admitting the project makes him feel good because he is helping others.

"It is consistent that the soldiers say what an inspiration Roger has been to them. It's nice that Roger inspires them," Kelli Parsons said.

To join the Parsons in their efforts to brighten soldiers' lives, visit www.anysoldier.com.

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