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Students make military pals

January 15, 2008

By Ken O'Brien STAFF WRITER

PLAINFIELD -- Melissa Aubuchon wanted to deliver a lesson about freedom to the eighth-grade students that she teaches at Indian Trail Middle School.

So, Aubuchon asked the 160 students in her social studies classes to write a letter to American soldiers in Afghanistan and Iraq. She followed the instructions on a Web site, Anysoldier.com, to get the letters to soldiers who receive little mail.

The students wrote to six contacts, with two in Afghanistan and four in Iraq, including someone in a K-9 unit and a Navy ship stationed off Iraq. Since mailing the letters in October, the students have received 18 responses, either in a letter or an e-mail.

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Indian Trail Middle School eighth-grader Kelly Boldyrew shows the letter she received from her military pen pal. Boldyrew is one of 19 Indian Trail students to have received contact from a pen pal stationed overseas. The responses began coming back in early November, including some from a K-9 unit in Iraq, from a U.S. Navy ship off the coast of Iraq and from Marines stationed in Iraq.

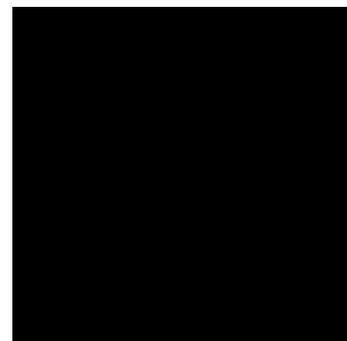
"I copy the letters and put them on a bulletin board," Aubuchon said. "I have been asked three times today if we got any more mail."

On Dec. 19, Aubuchon helped the students mail 12 care packages filled with licorice sticks, bubble gum and Pop Tarts. They also sent supplies for the K-9 unit, such as dog toys. The project has given students a chance to learn about how to write a letter and the proper etiquette for doing it, Aubuchon said. And she said the project has become a civics lesson.

"We have a luxurious lifestyle," she said of the United States. "We can only have that when someone ensures our freedom. I wanted the kids to realize there are people who keep us free."

The students received a letter from a Marine who is stationed at an air base in Iraq. Cpl. Andres Ramirez, who says his infant daughter was born in the fall after he left for Iraq, expressed holiday greetings in his Dec. 1 letter and thanked the students for writing.

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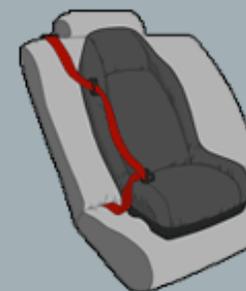
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"When I read your letter, I knew that this country is good," he wrote. "To the teacher of this class, thank you. You are my hero."

The students also got a letter from a 19-year-old Marine, who had been stationed in Iraq for six to eight months. Lance Cpl. John Lualhati said he knew he was going to join the military after the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorism attacks.

"Thank you so much for writing," he wrote. "We couldn't do it without the country's support."

Dominic Datro said that a member of his mother's family left for Iraq this week.

"I look up to them," he said of soldiers. "They are really brave."

Contact reporter Ken O'Brien at (815) 729-6119 or kobrien@scn1.com

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