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Happy Mail Club touches hearts of troops overseas



By [LONA O'CONNOR](#)
Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

Tuesday, February 12, 2008

Wielding glue sticks against a rising tide of cut-out pink hearts, members of the Happy Mail Club are working feverishly against a deadline. They must produce a big pile of greeting cards to be mailed to remote locations in time for Valentine's Day.



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The valentine makers have severe disorders that make it difficult for them to walk, talk, read or write. Ranging in age from young adults to nearly retirement age, they attend a training program at United Cerebral Palsy of Palm Beach & Mid Coast Counties, where they learn how to shake hands or shrink-wrap a package, skills that most people take for granted.

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Writing letters or sending gifts to soldiers overseas: www.anysoldier.com

United Cerebral Palsy: www.ucpsouthflorida.org



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But once a month, members of the valentine brigade have a vital job to do for someone else. For the past year, they have been sending mail and packages to soldiers in Iraq, Afghanistan, Africa and Bosnia, often in locations so remote that e-mail is impossible. Their mail, a respite from loneliness and danger, is air-dropped into desert and mountain camps.

Cherie Cashen, habilitation coordinator at United Cerebral Palsy's facility in Lake Worth, hit on the idea of sending mail to soldiers through an organization called anysoldier.com. She hoped that sending mail would help connect her clients with the wider world.

What she never expected was how dependent the soldiers would become on receiving mail from them.

"You have lifted my spirits, you have made me smile with your kind words," wrote a soldier from Task Force Gator, an Army reserve unit stationed in Afghanistan.

"They go to their bunks and hope for mail," said Cashen, who has read and saved every letter and photo from overseas. "They say that our happy mail always comes on their worst day."

Anysoldier.com is a morale-boosting program that directs mail and packages to soldiers who seldom hear from home. The members of the Happy Mail Club, most of whom live in group homes, often with no close family members, know what that feels like.

"Most of them never got personal mail before," said Ella Schutt, executive director of UCP for Broward and Palm Beach counties.

Happy Mail Club members send drawings and photos of themselves. In return, the soldiers sent them an American flag that had flown over the headquarters of the multinational



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Lucas Cannistraci/The Post
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Happy Mail Club members (from left) Ray Wyatt, assistant director Jason Twxidior, Joey Coste, program director Lory Masy and Cheryl Chilson fill packages in mid-January with valentines for soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan in a training program at United Cerebral Palsy's facility in Lake Worth.



Carl Kiilsgaard/The Post
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A small group of disabled adults are making Valentines to send to soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan

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Cashen has been writing to a female soldier from Coral Springs, urging her to visit when her tour in Iraq ends.

"Our dream is to see them coming home," she said.

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forces.

The club's growing collection of memorabilia also includes newsletters and jaunty black T-shirts emblazoned with the logo of "Storm Chaser," an Army National Guard unit, which also sent a certificate of appreciation.

Another unit, 3rd Platoon of the 182nd Sapper Company Route Clearance Team, wrote, "I can't tell you where we are in Iraq but I can tell you ... we drive in our area looking for the (improvised explosive devices) you hear about on TV."

Twenty-two members of the platoon signed the note. Others send photos of themselves and their buddies with flags or armored vehicles or helicopters in the background.

"Sometimes they really open up to us," Cashen said. "One told us of losing a 15-month-old child with a disability."

During the past year, several of the units have finished their tour of duty and returned home. More expect to leave in February. One pen-pal soldier was killed, but as Cashen explained gently to the Happy Mail Club, many more need to hear from them.

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