

Soldier's wish is mom's command: Group ships items that troops welcome

BY CATHERINE BAUM STAFF WRITER



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Louise Finn sorts donated items she will ship to her son, Marine Sgt. Matthew Finn of the Vikings Squadron 225, who is stationed in Iraq. She stores the items in her son's room.

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WORTHINGTON - Louise Finn, of Worthington, was so distraught over her son Matthew's tour of duty in Iraq that for several weeks after he left in August, she couldn't bring herself to set foot in his room.

Those days are over. With the help of a national organization whose goal is to help troops overseas, Finn has transformed her anxiety over her son's situation into action.

She is spearheading a local chapter of Soldiers' Angels, a volunteer-driven nonprofit that donates items to soldiers all over the world.

This story begins, as many good stories do, around the dinner table.

Over supper at Roberto's restaurant in Northampton this fall, Finn wanted to update her family and friends about her son, Sgt. Matthew Finn, 23, who calls her every three weeks or so. He requested vitamins, she told them, because he didn't want to eat the fried food being served, and new socks because his had partially disintegrated after working 13-hour, 130-degree days.

Finn's father-in-law, James Finn, a World War II Navy veteran, was appalled that his grandson, an ejection seat specialist for planes in the Marine Corps, did not have basic supplies, like socks.

'What do you mean, they don't have socks?' he asked Louise.

'We all assume that they have access to everything that they need, but they don't,' Louise Finn said.

A family friend at the table had heard of Soldiers' Angels, an organization she said brings a sense of 'home' to the military bases by donating little necessities like socks, toiletries and health supplements.

'The soldiers miss their beds and blankets, having a cell phone and having normal food,' said Jenna Medina, Matthew Finn's sister. 'The Soldiers' Angels sounded like an amazing program. It felt like we could do this. We could be members of the Soldiers' Angels.'

After that night, Finn told her friend Jaime Paschal, of Easthampton, about the organization.

'She was telling me all about it, and we were both teary-eyed,' said Paschal, who has known the Finn family for many years. 'We thought it was a good idea to try to help us keep our minds off of what could happen while he's over there. The soldiers are doing their part; we're doing ours.'

Soon, Finn 'adopted' her son and his entire squad, about 230 men and women, via the Soldiers' Angels organization. That means she sends donations, collected from 11 drop-off boxes located throughout the area, to Finn's base in Al Anbar province, Iraq, a 'huge' base that has one little store, which sells out quickly after it's stocked, Matthew Finn told his mother.

'I think people just assume that the government takes care of the men and women,' Paschal said. 'Not many people are aware of a variety of things they need and that a lot of soldiers don't have family members to send them these items. I wouldn't be aware of it if I didn't have somebody close to me involved in it.'

Items requested for donation include toothbrushes, toothpaste, lip balm, socks, snacks, vitamins, puzzle books, deodorant, shampoos, razors, brushes, shaving cream, muscle rubs, eyedrops, paper, pens, jigsaw puzzles, and more. Soldiers are in need of items to heal rashes, bites and sunburns, too, Finn added.

The red, white and blue boxes are located at the Worthington, Huntington, Cummington, Chesterfield and Southampton post offices; Besko's Appliance in Easthampton; Grynn & Barrett Studios in Holyoke; Universal Health and Fitness in Northampton; and Florence Savings Bank's three branches in Florence, Easthampton and Hadley. Finn said so far the most donations have come from the Worthington post office.

'I come in sometimes in the morning and there's a new pile out there,' said Lisa Turner, postmaster, who sees about a dozen people stopping to donate each week. 'They're like little elves, I tell ya.'

One woman decorated an old cigar box and wrote a note inside saying 'God bless you and may you come back soon,' Turner added.

'You know a handwritten letter is always the first thing you open in your mail,' Turner said. 'Those are the best.'

Florence Savings Bank donated \$200 for shipping costs, which are priced at a domestic rate at the post office. The bank used monies donated by employees who participate in dress-down Fridays.

'An organization doing the work needs not only donations but also the funds to move all those items around the world,' said Doug Burr, director of marketing at the bank.

Matthew Finn, who is scheduled to come home this spring, told his mother that her efforts are appreciated.

'It's kind of like kids in a candy shop,' Finn said. 'He said they just absolutely love it. Even if it's something like a puzzle book. Every single thing so far has been used.'

As for Louise Finn, she's reclaimed her son's bedroom. In fact, these days she uses it to store and organize donations, and address packages for sending off to Iraq.

'Before, I didn't even want to go in his room because he was gone, like really gone. I would not go in there. Absolutely not,' said a tearful Finn.

'But doing this just changed me. Every single minute I'm either printing off lists or dropping off boxes or checking them or talking to people on the phone about it. You should see his room; I'm totally taking over. I thought it would be a great tribute for him to do it there.'

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