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School supplies headed from Stamford to Iraqi children

By James Lomuscio
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STAMFORD -- With military-like precision, Petty Officer Grace Roman was on a humanitarian mission Thursday night. She opened, folded and taped the bottoms and sides of boxes at Westy Storage Centers here so U.S. Naval Sea Cadet Corps members could fill with them school supplies for Iraqi children.

"Children are the ones who get hit the worst by war, and this is our way of showing we care," said Roman, a senior at Trinity Catholic High School. Roman was among a dozen Sea Cadets on deck at Westy on Thursday night, where a long table in the lobby overflowed with pencils, spiral notebooks, markers, Jolly ranchers, M&Ms, shampoo, crayons and bears -- lots of bears. The Southwestern Connecticut Council of the Navy League donated the items to be shipped out to the Army's 1st Cavalry Division in Baghdad.

Nancy Bisset, who works in Westy's development office, expected at least 50 boxes to be filled and mailed that night. She said Westy was not only donating the space for the cadets to work, but the packing supplies and postage, too.

Westy's Stamford location is one of the company's dozen relief spots. Westy's efforts started in November 2003, Bisset said, after Chief Executive Officer Caesar Arredondo of Greenwich made a commitment to help. Before Thursday, Westy had shipped 531 boxes.

"Education is a way of fighting terrorism because it's bred on ignorance," Bisset said, adding that American troops are rebuilding 1,500 Iraqi schools.

Bisset read a letter from Army Maj. Nathan Hines whose address was affixed on the boxes.

"The school supplies, toys, clothes, shoes and blankets have contributed not only to the children, but to the soldiers on the ground," she read. "Your efforts continue to build goodwill within families, and this, in turn, builds relationships that reduce the number of attacks on our soldiers."

Watching the Sea Cadets fill boxes in Westy's lobby, its rear wall covered by a huge American flag, was Bisset's husband, Capt. Andrew Bisset, a Navy SEAL and member of the Naval Reserve.

"By allowing our soldiers to give these supplies to the school kids of Iraq, we're winning the hearts and minds of the Iraqi children and their parents," said Bisset, who served several months in Iraq.

Bisset cited an unconfirmed report that an Iraqi girl brandishing a stuffed bear stopped U.S. tanks from moving ahead to a land mine.

"This program is also boosting the morale of our troops because they get to see themselves doing a positive thing to help people," he added.

George McIntyre, commanding officer of the Sea Cadets, said the Stamford division, which comprises children ages of 11 to 17, teaches character development and leadership, things he said were evident that night. He also boasted that 17 of his Stamford cadets over the years have been accepted to the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Md., and three to West Point Military Academy.

Petty Officer Juan Diaz said he was accepted to the Naval Academy Preparatory School in Newport, R.I. He will spend 10 months there before going to Annapolis.

As he coordinated the packaging, Diaz echoed a word often used during the Iraqi campaign -- freedom. "It's only fair that they can enjoy the same freedoms that we're enjoying here," he said.

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