

2-2009

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Recommended Citation

Liberty University, "Show of Support: Students Behind Our Soldiers Makes Positive Impact" (2009). *February/March 2009*. Paper 20.
http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/lj_2009_feb/20

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Show of support: Students Behind Our Soldiers makes positive impact

February 01, 2009 | Teresa Dunham

Liberty University senior Amanda Jo Forth comes from a long line of fierce patriots.

“The military has always been such a big part of my life,” she said. “It was bred into me.”

A self-described army brat, she lived in seven states and two foreign countries throughout her childhood. Her grandfather is retired from the U.S. Air Force; her father flew a Blackhawk helicopter in Somalia not long after the Blackhawk Down incident, and her only brother, Jared, joined the U.S. Army the day after Sept. 11, 2001.

“I remember when my brother left [for Iraq], having to hug him and not knowing if he was coming home. People don’t get that,” said Forth, who wore a pair of her brother’s dog tags and never took them off until he returned a year and a half later.

For 23-year-old Forth, having a loved one away at war was a constant reality — and even after her brother came back, she remained committed to supporting the troops and championing them in personal ways at home.

That’s why she founded Students Behind Our Soldiers at LU in fall 2007.

The non-profit student organization with more than 40 members collects nonperishable food, videos, basic toiletries and other items for care packages shipped to soldiers whose names are submitted by students or community members.

The group united the campus in early November with a high-profile Military Appreciation Week, delivering guest speakers, yellow ribbons, a night tribute service for fallen soldiers, a National Guard equipment display, discussion panels and other patriotic activities.

Caring for the Troops

Twice a month, Students Behind Our Soldiers sets up a booth in the Arthur S. DeMoss Learning Center to collect donations — and so far they’ve gathered enough items to send more than 60 packages overseas to soldiers in Iraq, Afghanistan and Kuwait.

“We send a lot of cookies, crackers, peanuts and jerky,” Forth said. “We send DVDs and books because a lot of them are bored when they’re not actively doing something. We try to send stuff that reminds them of home.”

The packages also include pictures drawn by local elementary school children, handwritten letters from LU students, tracts sent in the name of former Liberty student and deceased veteran Jesse Strong, Bibles and other heartfelt reminders that people are praying.

A Patriotic Gathering

At a Students Behind Our Soldiers meeting last semester, fittingly scheduled on the anniversary of Sept. 11, members gathered to watch a video about a man who survived the Pentagon attack and also to discuss their hopes for the organization’s future.

“This is my way of giving back,” said Laura Blankenship, a member of the group’s leadership team.

She’s not a military brat, but her father works with homeland security.

Elaine Gordon, also a member of the group’s leadership team, doesn’t mind claiming the “military brat” title — and she doesn’t mind breaking a sweat for the cause either.

“It can be a little stressful, especially when we have massive boxes — like 20 or more boxes — to send out, but it’s definitely worth it,” said Gordon.

Several student veterans were also among members gathered that evening. One of them is 20-year-old Jeffrey Harrison, a sophomore studying strategic intelligence and international relations, who served in Iraq with the Army National Guard, performing combat logistics patrols, convoy security and supply escort.

“I received a lot of care packages, and I received one from Students Behind Our Soldiers in April. That was definitely good to see something from your own school,” he said.

For him, the best part of a care package — besides the cards and letters — was the beef jerky and homemade cookies that stayed fresh even via mail.

“I ate so much beef jerky over there,” he said, adding that platoons often got together and shared the packages so that every item went to good use.

Harrison said he also appreciated the DVDs.

“I think I watched more DVDs in that time period than I had in years prior. We’ll watch anything just because we’re desperate. I was watching chick flicks, just anything, to pass the time,” he said.

Now that he’s back home, Students Behind Our Soldiers is Harrison’s connection with those who wear the uniform abroad.

“After going over, it’s kind of hard to forget the guys that you were serving over there with and the guys who will be serving there in the future. I just hope to contribute a lot with ... getting packages over the

When Forth graduates, she would like to use her communications degree to start more non-profit Students Behind Our Soldiers chapters at universities nationwide. Email her at ajforth@liberty.edu for more information about joining or if you know a soldier who needs a care package.

To find out how LU's student soldiers are dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder, see the web exclusive [Student talks about serving in Iraq at PTSD awareness event](#).