

Students' story truly is good stuff

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By Kayla Bunge of the Times

MONROE -- Chad and Cody Plenge never thought their basement would be full -- to the ceiling, almost -- with stuffed animals.

"It's just amazing," Chad, 17, said. "I couldn't believe the basement was getting so full."

Chad, Cody and three of their classmates spent nearly two weeks collecting stuffed animals for children in Afghanistan and Iraq as part of a community service project for their international relations class at Monroe High School.

Chad got the idea a while back, when he read a magazine article.

"I didn't think it was something I'd have time to do with school and my other projects," he said.

But when the five boys needed an idea for a service project that would help a group of people somewhere in the world, Chad mentioned the article he'd read.

"This fit perfectly," he said. "It's something you can do in Monroe, without having to raise a lot of money."

The group liked the idea.

"It seemed simple," Cody, 15, added.

That's when Chad, Cody, Tim Miller, Joe Pecora and Greg Roberts got to work. They placed big collection boxes at the four elementary schools in Monroe: Abraham Lincoln, Northside, Parkside and St. Victor School.

The boys set a goal of about 100 stuffed animals. But it wasn't long before they had collected over 500 of the plush creatures.

"So then we decided, 'Let's try to get over 500.' And we got that," Cody said. "Then we said, 'Let's get 1,000.' And then that happened. They just kept coming!"

The boys officially collected stuffed animals from Oct. 2 through Oct. 13, but were still receiving donations a few days after they took the boxes out of the schools.

The final count: 1,889 stuffed animals. The boys also gave the elementary school teachers information to have their students write letters to the children and Wisconsin soldiers deployed in Afghanistan and Iraq.

"It was another way to get the students involved, rather than just bringing in their stuffed animals," Chad said.

He said the students colored pictures for the Middle Eastern children and told them about themselves and the United States in their letters. The boys will send about 100 letters along with the stuffed animals. The boys all said they were surprised at the success of their collection.

"It started as something small that worked out so well," Cody said.

Miller, 17, said he couldn't believe how fast the group went from having a half a box of toys to having boxes and bags full.

"It was just overflowing," he said.

Chad said the plush toys could be an Afghan or Iraqi child's only possession.

"They don't have a lot of possessions with all the conflicts and problems going on there," he said.

Pecora, 15, added that just having something small, like a stuffed animal, could make a child's day in those war-torn countries.

"It may not seem like a whole lot to us, because we have a lot of them," he said. "But getting it means so much to them."

"It gives them something to smile about," Cody added.

The boys spent the weekend packing up the stuffed animals and will use the money donated from various high school service organizations and clubs to pay for the postage to send them to Operation Iraqi Children in Missouri. OIC will send the toys and letters to military units in Afghanistan and Iraq for American soldiers to distribute to children in those areas.

Chad said he hopes the group's efforts help soldiers connect with kids overseas.

"I'm in the military so I have connections with soldiers, and I wanted to help them get a better reputation with kids," he said. "Just giving them a stuffed animal makes their day. They (soldiers) write back home and say it makes them so happy to see that smile on their face."

Cody said the project was special because it wasn't the same as other efforts for children in the Middle East.

"This is actually our work," he said. "We're doing it."

Miller agreed.

"It's special knowing they got them because of us," he said.