

From Canada with love Letter-writing project collects over 6,000 Christmas cards for soldiers

By Brock Weir

Christmas can be a lonely time for Canada's servicemen and women posted overseas and in remote parts of the country but, thanks to your efforts, the holidays was a little less lonely for hundreds of our finest stationed around the globe.

What started in early November as a grassroots community movement led by York Region resident Dianne Harrison with a goal of collecting 2,000 cards for soldiers overseas exploded into a drive which ultimately collected 6,002 Christmas greetings from the length and breadth of Southern Ontario, and even as far away as Calgary.

"There is so much going on in the world right now," says Ms. Harrison on why the simple call for cards and letters struck such a chord far beyond our community. "Students too are more aware of what is happening in the world now, too. They see TV, read the newspapers, and I think they are becoming a lot more compassionate. When I went out the week of Remembrance Day to a lot of the schools with Christmas cards, the students would put up their hands and tell me their grandfather was a World War Two vet, or someone they know is a soldier right now. I think there is a lot more love and compassion around there. People are just tired of awful things on the news and they wanted to do some good.

"People might think it is such a small gesture, but it is not."

To underscore her point, Ms. Harrison cites a letter that was sent out in an earlier iteration of this project, which was received and opened by a Canadian soldier just hours before he was killed in action, a story relayed to the project by one of his comrades.

"What did it do for that man to know there was somebody home safe that cared about him? For a stranger to tell him that they loved him, wanted him home safe, and we all want them home?" Ms. Harrison ponders. "We might not agree with the conflict, but we have to support our military wherever they are."

Despite this holiday season's massive outpouring of messages, it almost reached a significant stumbling block at the eleventh hour with Ms. Harrison being told by Canada Post they could not pick up the dozens of boxes she had wrapped, prepared, and had ready to pick up in the lobby of her apartment building. Some last minute intervention from the office her local MP, however, straightened out the situation and they were duly picked up by a postal worker who was very enthusiastic about the project.

"I was so upset," says Ms. Harrison of the word she received from Canada Post just minutes before they were to arrive at her apartment. "I thought of all the people who have sent love and compassion and were so proud of our military. For them not to receive these cards would break the hearts of all these children, knowing how much time they spent, and they didn't get them. We had people sending cards out there who have their own sons and daughters embarked overseas for Christmas and for these cards not to go out would be just heartbreaking.

"I was not going to stand for this, so I called [my MP] and they said they would take action. About 10 minutes later I got a call from Canada Post saying they would take the boxes."

In the meantime, she contacted the Royal Canadian Legion who offered a Plan B: Ontario Command delivering the letters themselves to CFB Borden.

But, everything ultimately fell into place. En route in the back of the Canada Post van were thousands of messages from all walks of life.

"The kids were telling the soldiers about where they live, their schools, some took ballet lessons and asked if their daughters did too," says Ms. Harrison. "Our six year old granddaughter and I were doing a card and she asked me what she should write. She has

been doing them since she was three and she was scribbling for the first few, but she knew words this year. She wrote her name and all of a sudden she put her fingers down on the card and traced them. She said, 'this means peace.'

Since the cards went out on the next leg of their journey, those who contributed to the campaign report responses back from soldiers based in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Poland.

'I hope every soldier knows that it is not just words that people have put on these cards, but it is love, compassion and pride,' says Ms. Harrison. 'We're so proud of them and they are sacrificing so much. I want to thank [everyone who wrote] from the bottom of my heart. We just put it out [in the media] and people picked this up. People I didn't even know were putting it on Facebook and forwarding and forwarding it. They opened their hearts. They are showing the soldiers they are not forgotten and I think we should be able to do this all year round.'

'Thank you to the parents and teachers who sat down with these children and being such role models to their communities, the veterans. It is endless the number of people to thank.'