

THE SWEET STUFF IN THE MIDDLE.



BRADFORD HUNTER LEONARD | PHOTO EDITOR

ARLENE MELCHIORRE created the Schine Adopts-a-Soldier program to provide packages to soldiers stationed in Iraq.

Not quite home

Holiday spirit shipped overseas brings cheer to armed forces



BRADFORD HUNTER LEONARD
| PHOTO EDITOR

MELCHIORRE AND HER CO-WORKERS display presents contributed to the bin in Schine 237.

By **Tori Woods**
STAFF WRITER

Barbra Bylicki, a sergeant in the U.S. Army, won't be home for Christmas this year. She won't be with her family, at the house of her mother, Arlene Melchiorre. She won't help put up a tree or open presents on Christmas morning. She won't get to eat her favorite food, her mother's pastilles — a Puerto Rican green banana and pork dish.

Instead, she will celebrate the season with the other 77 members of the Logistics Task Force 530th unit in Camp Victory, Iraq.

Melchiorre, the administrative assistant for the Center for Public and Community Service at Syracuse University, said Christmas will be hard for her this year. She knew she had to do something to help bring the holidays to those soldiers serving overseas; people who sacrifice their holidays for everyone.

"It's going to be a little sad, but the reason I'm doing Schine Adopts-a-Soldier is there are a lot of fathers and mothers and parents and brothers and sisters and family that are also

going to be missing their sons and daughters during the holiday," Melchiorre said. "We want to bring the holidays a little closer to them."

Melchiorre started the program to bring the holidays to the soldiers in the 530th unit. She is accepting donations of things the soldiers say they miss from home and individually labels each present for a specific soldier.

"I've decided to personalize the gifts, which I think makes it a little more personal for the soldiers, and even for the person giving the gift," Melchiorre said.

Melchiorre's daughter, Bylicki, was deployed to Iraq last April. Melchiorre misses her every day, but is proud and supports her. She knows that, as hard as it is for families to be without their soldiers during the holidays, it is even harder for the soldiers.

"It will be hard for her to be away for the holidays, as it will be for all of the other soldiers there," Melchiorre said. "The holidays are a time of getting together with family and friends, and enjoying the things that celebrate the season. These soldiers won't be home.

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They'll be in their barracks."

Bylicki wrote, in an e-mail from Iraq, "Now, with the holidays approaching, time is our worst enemy. I see in myself and other soldiers that we would love to be home where people and our families are inviting, the food is comforting and the warmth is soothing."

Although the military makes many efforts to give the soldiers some tastes of home around the holidays, Bylicki said it's not quite the same.

"Our dining facilities and our PX are decorating and trying to keep in the holiday spirit. It's a natural reaction to have an unspoken pact that we will be each other's family for the holidays, but it's never the same," Bylicki said. "At the same time, it's all we have. So if I can't be home with my family, I'd rather be here with my comrades, who are my family now."

It is especially important to show the troops support during the holiday season, Melchiorre said.

"The soldiers over there, they're not robots — they're human beings," Melchiorre said. "They have chosen this life, filled with sacrifices."

Matthew Zeller, a graduate student at the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs and a second lieutenant in the Army, said he personally feels it is essential to thank soldiers who are currently deployed.

"When you're on duty, getting mail is such a morale boost," Zeller said. "When it's from your family and friends, it's great. But when a complete stranger says 'thank you,' that support is such a tremendous resource."

Zeller wants this generation's veterans to never feel like the veterans of wars such as Vietnam, and people can help make that happen through participating in programs such as Schine Adopts-a-Soldier.

"When someone you've never met before, and probably won't meet, says thanks for doing this on all of our behalf, it shows them that people at home are thankful for the sacrifice they make," Zeller said. "They're giving at least a year of their life, and they volunteered for the job. They're doing the job no one else wanted to do."

It is important for people to remember that each soldier is an individual, with family, friends and lives independent of the military, Melchiorre said. They're not just a faceless group of people.

All members of the military have a story, and Bylicki is certainly not an unknown soldier. She is 30 years old, although her mother said she would deny it, telling people she is 25-going-on. She married her husband Adam, who is in the Army's 82nd Airborne Division, in 2000. Bylicki has two cats, named Pumpkin and Mister, that her mom is cat-sitting while she is in Iraq.

Bylicki loves her mother's traditional Puerto Rican cooking, such as arroz con gandules, a yellow rice and pigeon peas dish. Her life favorites include the "Star Wars" movies, fantasy novels, Captain Morgan and Coke with a slice of lime, dancing, any type of music and traveling. She hopes to go to Ireland in January with a fellow soldier when they get a little rest and relaxation time.

Melchiorre said Bylicki joined the Army four years ago and has moved up the ranks quickly in that time. Melchiorre is proud of her daughter, and said Bylicki absolutely loves serving her country.

"She has a tremendous sense of duty and loyalty to this country, and I think that's what keeps her focused on what she has to do," Melchiorre said.

Melchiorre will ship the packages to her daughter's company this Friday. Even though it's more than a month before Christmas, she hopes that the packages will arrive in time. It can take months for packages to reach soldiers overseas.

"They'll know that there people out here thinking about them, aside from their family and friends," Melchiorre said. "It's our way of saying, 'Thank you for what you're doing. If it weren't for what you're doing, we would not be able to celebrate any season.' It's just our little thank you."

The holidays must be especially hard for soldiers to be away from home for the holidays, and students here can help make it a little easier for them, said Alex Saslow, an undecided freshman in The College of Arts and Sciences.

"We can be thinking about them, sending them messages or whatever they need," Saslow said. "Everyone can help."

It must be especially hard for soldiers stationed in Iraq, since it would be virtually impossible for them to come home while they are deployed, said Sarana Posmantier, a junior advertising major.

"We can emotionally support them," Posmantier said. "We can show them, person to person, through care packages, or letters of support. We can let them know that what they're doing is worth it."

Zeller thinks that although deployed soldiers are likely thinking of home more than usual due to the holidays, citizens should remember their overseas soldiers more often.

"It's as tough a job on Aug. 6 as it is on Dec. 25 or Thanksgiving Day," Zeller said. "Every day away from your family is hard. I wish we would remember that."

Bylicki is excited about the program, more for her fellow soldiers than for herself.

"The adopt-a-soldier program is beautiful. I can't tell you how many soldiers do not receive mail," Bylicki said. "It is heartbreaking to know that some soldiers are here and no one in their family seems to support them ... they always seem to be the youngest ones who came straight from high school into the Army and are away from home for the first time. These are the ones that will receive a gift from the program first."

The show of support means the most to the men and women in the 530th, even more than physical items, Bylicki said.

"Just a little bit of acknowledgment from civilians means the most to us. It tells us that we are doing good here," Bylicki said.

Melchiorre said her daughter's company is due home around April or May, "hopefully, God willing." The Army warns family members that returning soldiers may have changed, and Melchiorre is ready for that potential.

"They've seen things and done things that to you and I would be horrendous," Melchiorre said. "It's a life-changing experience. Sometimes it takes awhile for them to come back."



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ARLENE MELCHIORRE looks through names of soldiers stationed in Iraq. "There are the soldiers left who still need presents," Melchiorre said.

This knowledge is tempered by the excitement of thinking of her daughter's return. Her face lights up while talking about the eventual homecoming.

"I can't wait until my baby comes home. I can't wait!" Melchiorre said. "I know she's probably going to be a lot different, but she'll still be my baby. She'll still be the little girl I know."

Though she was never very Christmas-y growing up, Bylicki said she has a newfound appreciation for family holidays.

"All the little things that annoyed me growing up are what I will miss the most. My brother being a smartass, my mother never leaving the kitchen to chill out or asking me to help with the dishes," Bylicki said, "picking up the wrapping paper from the living room, my cats unwrapping the toy I got them and playing with the paper instead of the toy, watching Mom

struggle putting up the lights; she has grand ideas but ends up only framing the door instead. Most importantly, I will miss Mom's Christmas mantle piece she does every year that she so adores, but my brother and I just crack up at the poor thing."

While Melchiorre waits for her daughter to come home, life goes on. She comes into work every day and is the conductor of a busy, bustling office. She will celebrate Christmas, make her Puerto Rican dishes and the traditional Christmas ham, raise a tree and celebrate when her son visits. But she will be thinking about her daughter, several time zones and half a world away. Melchiorre hopes her project will bring a little bit of home to the soldiers in Iraq.

"We're hoping this will bring a little Christmas cheer," Melchiorre said. "Isn't that what Christmas is about, giving to those that are not