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Local soldier brings joy to Iraqi children

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ST. ANDREW DEANERY — Serving in the military far from home is challenging enough, especially during the holiday season. But imagine being a child in a war-torn country, facing daily threats of violence when life should instead be carefree.

A local soldier, Army 2nd Lt. Ben Franzosa, and his platoon are doing what they can to bring joy into the lives of the Iraqi children with whom they have daily contact. Franzosa, member of St. Gertrude Parish in Madeira and 2008 graduate of the University of Dayton, is seeking donations for Operation Soccer Ball (OSB). The grassroots effort collects monetary donations and soccer balls and distributes them to Iraqi children.

“A simple act of giving a child a soccer ball gives him or her a sense of enjoyment, of hope,” said Rick Franzosa, who along with his wife, Mary, is supporting their son’s efforts here at home.



Army 2nd Lt. Ben Franzosa hands out a soccer ball to an Iraqi child. (Courtesy photo)

Operation Soccer Ball was established several years ago by Army Capt. Daniel Merritt, who witnessed the joy in children’s faces upon receiving such a gift. Since that day, thousands of balls have been distributed.

“It amazes me to see all the smiles and excitement when they get their soccer ball and run off to go and play,” Capt. Merritt wrote in the OSB webpage blog. “Kids remember these things, just like we recall our first baseball mitt or bicycle. These types of events are forever burned into our memory, and you can always look back and smile about that day.”

The effort creates meaningful moments for the soldiers as well, as it helps the locals understand that troops are safeguarding and patrolling the streets with the Iraqi police, explained Merritt. “They tell their friends about how the Americans come around and bring hundreds of balls. This is a positive sign; we are a positive force.”

Ben Franzosa learned about Operation Soccer Ball last June when he attended a briefing by Capt. Merritt in advance

of his deployment to Iraq. According to his father, the lieutenant immediately made contact with him and said, "Dad, how would you like to do something for your son and your country?"

The Franzosas were quick to embrace the project, as was their son, who has now taken over coordinating it from Capt. Merritt.

"It's not only the humane thing to do, it is also good for world peace," Ben Franzosa wrote in an email to his mother, explaining the reasoning behind his involvement in Operational Soccer Ball. "If we want to make any lasting changes in Iraq, we have to influence the current generation."

Serving with the military police, Franzosa and his platoon spend a lot of time on patrol, including joint efforts with their Iraqi counterparts, and have regular contact with the children. As the soccer balls are distributed, the soldiers are quickly surrounded by excited, happy children.

"The kids are always there and always want to be close to the soldiers," Franzosa said. "They're very curious about Americans."

The Franzosas have collected some 300 soccer balls to date and say their son's goal is to distribute 1,000 during his one-year tour of duty in Iraq that will end next July.

"We've had money and balls donated and send the balls directly to Ben," his father explained. "There has been an incredible response, and we're amazed by everyone's generosity. One auto repair place donated 20 soccer balls. There's one area woman who has gotten her friends involved, and we've been going by her house every day to pick up a load of soccer balls."

The Franzosas say they're not surprised by their son's commitment to Operation Soccer Ball and his desire to bring some fun into the lives of the Iraqi children.

"Ben's always been a real people person and he just loves kids," said Rick Franzosa. "I'm always humbled by the things he does. He's all about honor and doing the right thing, and I'm very proud of him. He's a great role model for the Iraqi children and his platoon."

"He's very religious and is all about serving others," added his mother, noting that her son has a small rosary he carries with him into the field.

For more information or to make a donation to Operational Soccer Ball, visit <http://www.operationsoccerball.org/>.