

## Beanie Babies foster goodwill with Iraqi kids

By KATHRYN CANAVAN

Cpl. Stephen McGowan of Newark was having a normal week when he spotted some little girls outside a home in Ramadi, Iraq, in October. A normal week for the 25-year-old Army medic includes an occasional gunfight, staying awake for two days straight, six or seven booby-trapped explosive devices and at least one mortar or rocket attack.

McGowan and his crew are part of the 2nd Brigade Combat Team's quick reaction force that responds to firefights and explosive devices. They usually come in contact with families with children during their searches, so they began carrying candy and soccer balls in their armored Humvee.

McGowan had already e-mailed relatives to send small items he could give out to Iraqi children instead of shipping him Christmas presents this year.

Then, one day in October, the platoon sergeant received a package from home with Beanie Babies inside. "At one house, there were some little girls and one of the girls was holding her little brother," McGowan's mother Bobbie said.

"Stephen said normally little girls won't approach the soldiers at all, but when they saw the Beanie Babies, they ran inside and got their father. Through hand signals, the father agreed they could give the Beanies to the children."

When the medic told his mom how much the girls liked the Beanies, she got on the public address system at the Charter School of Wilmington, where she is dean of humanities.

"I put it on the morning announcements. I just said soldiers like to give out things to the Iraqi children, and if anybody would like to give away any of their old Beanie Babies, come see Ms. McGowan. The next thing I know, I'm inundated with Beanies," she said.

Freshman Veronica Fones lugged in a black garbage bag bulging with almost 200 Beanies.

"My grammy likes Beanie Babies, and she has doubles of a lot of them, and she gave them to my brother, who was going to sell them, but he never really got around to it, so I asked him if I could have them to give to the kids in Iraq. He said sure," Fones said.

McGowan, now temporary custodian of several hundred Beanie Babies, was overwhelmed by her students' generosity. Seniors had to help her get bags of Beanies to her car. There are so many that she's separated them into small parcels for mailing on different dates so there is room in the Humvee for equipment and crew members.

"I don't think Stephen has any place to store this many Beanie Babies in his little cramped quarters, so it will just work out better for him to get them in shifts, and he'll be able to share them with other soldiers who are also out on different missions," she said.

"I just couldn't believe the generosity of the students. There was nothing in me that expected the kind of response that I got."

"I think it's also a great opportunity for the students to look beyond themselves. One student said to me, 'Well, do the Beanie Babies still have to have their tags?' I said, 'These children's homes are in rubble. I don't think that's an issue for them. These are not collector's items there.'"

For Stephen McGowan, a 1996 St. Mark's High School graduate who first started giving the children his Army rations and water bottles, the Beanies are a boon.

"Oftentimes, when we go to the countryside for an operation, we meet children who are from very poor families. So we try to brighten their day as much as possible," McGowan said by e-mail.

"Not everyone here is our enemy. A lot of these people just want the chance to live a decent life and raise their children in safety. True, we do find weapon caches and fight insurgents, but the children are the ones who suffer here. They just want to go to school and not worry about having food on the table. I see what we are doing here as trying to provide them with a future. I will always be a soldier first, but I truly enjoy when I can be a friend as well."