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Hugs and more

Clients of an adult day care offer packages for troops, warm welcome for visitor

MEILING AROUNNARATH, Staff Writer

CARRBORO - The tall, sturdy man in camouflage and Army boots marched up to the house at 109 Hillcrest Ave. and peered through the doorway.

Sgt. Harold Liles was on a mission.

The Charles House Eldercare Center, an adult day care, had declared Thursday "Hug a Soldier Day" while clients put together care packages for troops overseas.

Single-serving Kool-Aid packets, "Casino Royale" DVDs, bottles of Suave shampoo and packages of Ramen noodles were just a few of the goods that filled the flat-rate U.S. Postal Service boxes.

"Most of the men at Charles House have been in World War II, and many of the women had contributed during that time, like worked at bases and such," said program director Liane Senter. "So this thing is very close to them -- you know, the hardships that come with it. The needs. The big thing is to know that people at home are thinking about you."

Senter had sent care packages to her son when he was stationed in Iraq, an idea she got from AnySoldier.com. So, on Thursday, she introduced the program to the older clients at Charles House.

"We had talked a lot about World War II. ... They had kept track of my son over there," she said. "And we talked about how they could contribute something positive."

Phyllis Montgomery, 84, worked in an office at an Army base during the war. She remembers she once gave a young soldier a pin off her shirt.

"I just thought I had something that I could give to him, and he could give it to a girlfriend or whomever," she said. "He was a young man, you know, and it was during wartime. I just felt a little different during that time."

Now, even though she is not among soldiers, she is still giving gifts.

"I was hoping there were things they could really be happy with, not just any old thing," Montgomery said. "I know what goes on, and I want to make sure they got something good to eat. They deserve it. They're all very young, you know."

As the clients finished packing the boxes with sunflower seeds, candy and personalized cards, in walked Liles.

Becky Bradley, a volunteer at Charles House, had found the 25-year-old recruiter last week at the new Army Career Center in Chapel Hill. He said he was happy to meet people.

"Especially in this area, to get out into the community and do something positive," he said.

At first, the men and women at the center only shook Liles' hand.

Then, as Liles lingered, Montgomery stood up to give him a hug. And, one by one, almost all wrapped their slender arms as far around him as they could.

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Phyllis Montgomery, 84, gives Sgt. Harold Liles a hug at the Charles House Eldercare Center in Carrboro. Liles was introduced to the clients and got hugs while they packed boxes of items for service members on duty overseas.

Staff Photos by Harry Lynch

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