

## It's all hands-on deck this holiday season as Soldier Card initiative marks 20 years

Hundreds of writers and dozens of local businesses have come together in this season of Remembrance to make the holiday season ahead extra merry for serving Canadian soldiers.

This year marks the 20th year Aurora's Dianne and Brian Harrison have been mobilizing the Town and surrounding communities to pen Christmas and Holiday cards for Canadian servicepersons stationed overseas, or simply away from home.

This year, they have set a goal of collecting 10,000 cards, which will be delivered to CFB Trenton for distribution at the beginning of September. They had the same goal last year, and handily surpassed it at 11,767.

At press time this week, they were well underway thanks not only to those who have picked up the pen, but 30 locations across Aurora and Newmarket that serve as drop-off points for your simple, poignant messages.

'So many different businesses have stepped up to the plate this year,' says Dianne, making particular mention of the Optimist Club of Aurora for distributing cards for signing, not to mention filling in hundreds of their own, and Omars Shoes for donating countless shoeboxes for a cause - each of which is lovingly filled and decorated for the respective bases, where they are typically distributed by the appointed chaplain.

That, too, represents another element of community collaboration as each chaplain is set to receive a card of their own created especially for purpose by local artist Deborah Campo.

'People have got compassion because we live in a safe country and our hearts go out to the military who are in other countries as we just don't know what they're seeing,' says Harrison. 'I think with what's going on, people know sort of more readily what's going on and they want to let soldiers know that they care. We have to let them know that we care.'

'Last year when we delivered the cards to Trenton, we met two soldiers I'd been chatting to back and forth for about a month. As they unloaded the van with all the boxes, I turned to them and said, 'I'm a hugger. Would you mind if I gave you a hug?' These four lovely officers gave me really sincere hugs, but the last soldier - it was so warm and compassionate and, as he stood back, he looked at me with tears in his eyes.'

'He said, 'Just to let you know, I was deployed in Egypt last year and I received a card from back home. You have no idea what it meant to me to receive a card back home from somebody who didn't know me, who cared about me.' That one message from that soldier has made us really propel this year to have even more people send boxes and cards this year.'

As Harrison marks 20 years spearheading this initiative, she's proud that more businesses and organizations than ever before have signed up to be drop-off points.

In addition to Town Hall and the Aurora Public Library, members of the public who have taken the time to write can also drop them off at Tina's Grill, Wicked Eats, Bunchberry Diner, Chocolate & Co., Kingsway Place, Park Place Manor, among others, while Newmarket locations include Southlake Village and Concierge Realty at Bayview and Mulock.

The first batches of cards will be picked up November 18, with the second pickup slated to take place November 25 so there is enough time to fill the boxes and get them set for Trenton.

'We're encouraging people to put their email addresses on the cards because the soldiers seem to be able to respond much quicker by email than by land mail. A lot of schools and cub groups don't want the kids' addresses on it, but if you want to put a group leader's address on it, that would be great. Write something personal. Tell something about home. Tell people where you're from. Maybe the soldier that is receiving those cards is from your hometown. You just never know. If you've got grandchildren, get your

grandchildren to draw a little picture because, again, you never know that the person receiving the card overseas doesn't have a young child at home.

?One thing that I would really like people to do is after you've had your joy at Christmas of your family being there and all the cards go on sale after Christmas, start scooping up all the cards that are in the stores that are on sale and throughout the year, in January, when you're warm and cozy, around your fireplace, enjoying your home, remember what our soldiers are doing overseas and start writing out some cards. By the time we send out the messages next year in 2026, you'll have cards ready for us to go. I also remind people you don't have to put postage on your cards. It's postage-free [through us]. Just put on the envelope, ?To a Canadian Soldier.'?

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