

## Local couple surpasses goal collecting Christmas, holiday cards for serving soldiers

They set out to collect 10,000 cards for men and women in the Canadian Armed Forces who will be spending this holiday season serving King & Country at home and abroad ? but Dianne and Brian Harrison smashed their goal, setting a new record for their initiative of nearly 20 years.

The Aurora couple were bound for Trenton this week to deliver a whopping 11,785 cards for service personnel. These will subsequently be delivered to Forces Bases and Naval Ships here at home and overseas.

It's a remarkable number by any measure, made all the more so by the fact the couple was able to break all their previous records in the midst of a postal strike.

?'We are overwhelmed with support,?' says Dianne Harrison, noting they received cards from across the Greater Toronto Area, with service groups in each community coming together to do their part.

Among the service groups who harnessed the power of their membership was the Optimist Club of Aurora, which helped complete and collect more than 5,200 individual messages for soldiers. Others who helped make this year's effort possible were Allegra Printing, which provided printing services to the Harrisons free of charge, and Omar's Shoes, which saved all their empty shoeboxes to aid in the shipments.

?'We couldn't have sent the cards without those shoeboxes,?' says Dianne. ?'We're over the moon, and the cards were written with love, compassion and sincerity. There were big bags of cards left at our apartment and our mailbox was full. We were always getting calls from people, and we put in more miles this year just travelling around picking up cards. We drove to London, ON, one night to pick up 200 cards that were signed by a bunch of people out there because of the mail strike ? if the mail couldn't get them to us, we decided to go and get them.

?'People took the time [to complete a card] because they know the military needs to hear we care. The one thing is they can't imagine what our military is going through right now, what they have seen? I don't think the average person could even comprehend it. My heart goes out to them. Sometimes I think they must feel helpless they can't do more, but they can only do so much and the fighting goes on. I think they must wonder when it is ever going to end.?'

But, as long as there is a need, the Harrisons hope the initiative will go on.

As they approach their 20th anniversary leading this initiative in 2025, they are hoping to keep the momentum going, although Dianne says Brian's proposed goal of 20,000 next year might be a tall order.

?'There is no way we can handle that,?' she says. ?'We did over 9,000 last year and this year it is 12,000 and it was very taxing.?'

That being said, they hope to mark next year's milestone by making further inroads into local schools and potentially keeping the collection and distribution of messages going beyond Christmas.

?'We think about them year-round, not just at Christmas,?' says Dianne. ?'We should be thanking them 12 months of the year.?'

**By Brock Weir**