

Helping Military Kids

Residents Turn to District Program to Help Soldiers' Families

HOLTON, Kan. – It was just a small nudge, but it has helped Holton resident Sue Wichman provide a lot of joy to kids of military families in Kansas.

“My three-year-old granddaughter came over one day and said, ‘what are you going to do with all those bears,” said Wichman of a hand-embroidered, sewing project she began in 2011, “and I thought, if it’s a bear in a child’s eyes, then it’s a bear.”

Over the past year, Wichman has finished more than 40 of the bears, each unique in color and style – and each destined for Hero Packs provided through Operation: Military Kids (OMK) in Kansas.

In 2011, OMK distributed 2,342 backpacks to children of recently deployed soldiers. K-State Research and Extension and Kansas 4-H are partners in Kansas, providing the program through many district and local offices.

The backpacks include such items as a journal, disposable camera, stuffed animals, activity books, small games, puzzles or other similar items.

Meadowlark District agent Nancy Nelson, whose district team was new to OMK in 2011, notes that military families live in all but eight Kansas counties, based on reports of those who receive military health insurance benefits. The district now serves as one of two local and regional support networks for OMK in



Holton resident Sue Wichman shows one of about 40 teddy bears she has made for Operation: Military Kids

Kansas.

Nelson says that if it weren’t for being in a district structure, her county would never have been able to join the effort.

“Working in an extension district allows me time to specialize in some programming such as OMK, of which Hero Packs is one part,” she said.

“Often times, (military) families are scattered across Kansas and they become very isolated. We are trying to draw attention to community members to help support them and be good neighbors. A lot of times (families) need help with transportation, childcare, and maybe household tasks. We’re here to encourage support of the family while their soldier is deployed.”

In 2011, the Meadowlark District board filled Hero Packs for the first time, coinciding with the fifth anniversary of forming the district.

It’s also been Wichman’s way of helping others: “I enjoy making the bears and I am glad to do it,” she says. “And, as long as they are needed, I plan to continue.”