

LOCAL

Residents at Conowingo Veterans Center receive over 500 holiday cards

By JACOB TOOK

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CONOWINGO — Conowingo Veterans Center received over 500 holiday cards last week addressed to the 16 residents of the assisted living facility. Director of Operations and Delegating Nurse Raye Ragan said they were overwhelmed with the outpouring of love.

"It was just awesome," she said. "The guys couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe it. I never expected that we would have such a response."

Ragan said that when she first put out a call on Facebook for holiday cards, she thought it was realistic to hope for 100.

"We surpassed that number within the first couple days," she said. "It was really an amazing thing to see."

It's been a hard year all around, but many challenges are magnified for the residents who have passed much of the year in isolation. Their contact with visitors has been limited, and they have been unable to participate in or host social events which normally fill the calendar.

After many difficult months, though, the holiday cards were a much-needed dose of good spirits and warm holiday cheer.

"This year kind of got everybody down in a funk — we're lonely, we're sad," Ragan said. "It was awesome to see so many people want to take time and contribute."

In addition to the hundreds of holiday cards, a number of organizations and community members contributed puzzles, games, crosswords, cookies and other sweet treats, all of which buoyed the veterans through the holidays.

Some of the cards were particularly heartwarming.



PHOTO COURTESY OF RAYE RAGAN

Joseph Young and other residents at Conowingo Veterans Center felt the festive spirit thanks to over 500 holiday cards from community members.

"As much as they like the cards from adults, they really, really enjoyed the handmade cards from the kids," Ragan said. "They definitely appreciated the time that the kids put into those pictures and drawings, and the words they wrote — it really lit their hearts on fire."

A good chunk of those messages from kids were collected by Cecil County Public Library's Teens Give Back for the Holidays program, which supplied young people in the county with kits to make uniquely special handmade cards.

Ragan said Liz Drummond, the library's Perryville teen librarian, reached out in mid-November, hoping to collect cards for the veterans. Drummond invited Ragan to a virtual card-making event on Dec. 11.

CCPL Youth Services Coordinator Katelyn McLimans estimated that they took in close to 150 cards after the event, which she delivered to Conowingo Veterans Center a few days before Christmas.

For McLimans, seeing the range of personal messages included by the young people was heartwarming —

some included their favorite Christmas carol lyrics, others wrote recipes for hot cocoa, and many just shared stories and wrote about themselves.

"They were so creative, and I was so impressed by them," McLimans said. "And it gives them a sense of pride that they're able to help others."

Looking ahead, McLimans said that given the response, they would consider doing something similar next year — and maybe by then, some of the young people could go and meet the veterans in-person. In the shorter term, she said that young people looking to get involved could join the library's Teen Advisory Group to help plan programs.

Over at the center, Ragan said they are hoping to be able to host a big community barbecue at some point this summer to celebrate putting the virus in the past.

"Anybody who sent cards or participated in any way, shape or form over this difficult time would be able to come and meet our guys," she said. "Hopefully we can thank them with a meal and good time."