



I have always had the greatest respect for the US military. After being widowed by a traffic accident in 1987, I went into a depression and finally decided the best way to get out of it was to do things for others. I volunteered at Skyline Urban Ministries, Jesus House, Feed the Children, etc. Then, in 1990, when the US entered Desert Shield, I involved my church in a letter writing campaign to support our troops. Some of those letters ended up onboard the aircraft carrier USS Independence where the man I've now been married to for more than 15 years plucked one from the middle of a stack of mail in the morale office. Ray and I both know God directed his hand that day.

My husband I lived in Japan for 5 years and while there, I drove a taxi on the Yokosuka Naval Base and also taught English to Japanese businessmen, homemakers and students. In 1999, Ray left the Navy and we moved back to Oklahoma.

Fast forward to June 2004 – – I have a back injury that keeps me off work. I'm looking at spinal fusion in a few months. At that time, I was seeing a wonderful chiropractor here in Edmond and every day when I walked down the hall to the treatment room, I would see the picture of his Marine son who was then serving in Iraq. We had been told since the war's beginning that if we didn't actually know someone over there, that we couldn't even send letters. So, I told the doctor, if he thought it was okay, I would like to send his son some emails. He loved the idea. He thought it was important that they knew that more than just their families support them.

Ray and I began a friendship with Justin and then Justin asked us to write to his friend, Ted who asked us to write to Erica and Michael and it grew from there. They were starved to hear that average Americans respect them for the difficult job that they do. Well, that was certainly easy enough for us to do. From there, we decided to send a few care packages even though they insisted that they didn't want us to go to that expense. One guy even said, "We don't want to run you broke".

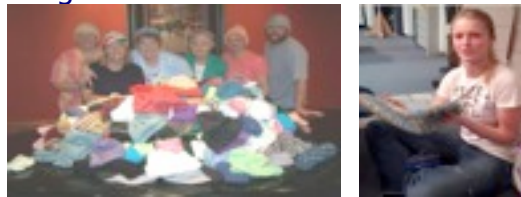
About a week later, I was cleaning out spam email and when I opened one that talked about how to make cool ties that can lower body temps by more than 7+ degrees, I got goose bumps. I knew this was what God was leading me to do. I had just read about a young 22 year-old woman who collapsed and died of heat stroke while standing guard duty. There was only one problem – – I hadn't sewn since high school, didn't own a sewing machine and I couldn't figure out the directions (more complicated than they are now). So, in my frustration, I posted on the Food TV message board that I knew how to save our troops from heat stroke but I couldn't understand the directions. I asked if someone could help me learn how to make the cool ties and several women replied, "Send me instructions and I'll make some for you. Then, just tell me where you want them sent". Before I ever learned to make one, about 100 had already been mailed to the Middle East. My daughter, Kaci said, "Maybe your job isn't sewing, maybe you're supposed to be the 'recruiter'". So, that's what I did, I went onto Military.com and other troops-friendly websites and began telling people how they could help.



The name The Hugs Project came about because these things go around the neck like a {{{hug}}} and we believe that every U.S. service person deserves a hug from home.

We now have a Yahoo group of more than 3,000 worldwide members (we have members in every state and 58 foreign countries) but thousands more are making and sending out cooling ties and doing other parts of the project that haven't actually joined "the group". We get E-mails every day from individuals, churches, VFW auxiliaries, home schooled children and their parents, 4-H groups, Girl Scouts, quilting and sewing circles, etc. and they all want info about how they can help. Sometimes they join online and report the numbers of "hugs" they send out but usually we don't get reports back about how many they have sent. They send to sons, daughters, husbands, wives, neighbors and local people serving and since they don't need us to provide addresses for them, we don't hear from them again.

We'll soon be switching gears from summer to winter. Last winter, we sent out hundreds of warm hats and neck warmers and we will continue knitting, crocheting and looming hats for shipment this fall for when the cold weather hits again.



We send out black wool knit hats, neck warmers, balaclavas and fingerless gloves to ship to the troops. We also make knitted neck pillows so that they have a place to lay their heads for a quick nap inside a Humvee, track vehicle or MRAP. We send colorful hats that they can give to the children and flat bears and school bags for our troops to share with the little ones. We know that whenever soldiers make a friend of a child, that child might tell where weapons are stored, bombs are made or bad guys are hiding. Making a friend of a child can sometimes save a soldier's life...that's powerful.

Christmas 2009

Christmas 2010

Christmas 2011



Nationwide, The Hugs Project has sent out over 1.4 MILLION neck coolers, the result of a desire to help make life a little better for some of America's finest young men and women. :o) Each week, from our Oklahoma City location alone, we send out 50-100 care packages to all areas where we have troops deployed in harm's way. Since our inception, our worldwide members have sent out over **600 TONS** of care package items!



Most of the things we have sent were to people who have already returned home so we basically start from scratch each month. There are a lot of military members in the Middle East and countless US civilians so our job is unending. We will continue to give our troops a hug around the neck until they can all come home. Thank you for allowing me to tell you about this effort to let our troops know that they are NOT forgotten.

Karen Stark