

Booked for the holidays: Volunteer sending paperbacks to troops

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EASTHAMPTON - When city resident Michael Engel heard that the Emily Williston Library was putting its operation paperback drive on hold during the director's maternity leave, he leapt into action.

In the past several weeks, Engel, 62, has boxed and shipped between 400 and 500 paperback books collected at the library to military personnel stationed overseas.

Shipping costs, at approximately \$8 per 25 books (U.S. postage rates apply when shipping to military bases), have been raised through donation jars at the library.

Engel doesn't send just any old book. Every week, he receives a list of requested genres and troop addresses sent to Operation Paperback from U.S. troops.

He then sifts through donations.

Diamond Golden and Engel have found that troops have asked for biographies, history books, current events literature, business and computer magazines, science fiction and true crime.

Golden is the youth librarian and stand-in for Director Becky Plimpton-Marconi.

'It's impressive how many want history or politics or biography or thought-provoking books,' said Engel, who is a professor emeritus of political science at Westfield State College.

Engel, who described himself as 'anti-war,' was drafted into the army and stationed in Germany during the Vietnam War.

'My friends were over in Vietnam and they hated it and they hated the war,' he said. 'It was tremendously frustrating to them.'

Engel said that he feels great about doing something to help the troops.

'It's a way of saying I'm against the war but I support the troops and I know what it means to be a soldier,' he said.

Founded in 1999, Operation Paperback is a national nonprofit that facilitates the collection of paperback books, which are then sent to troops stationed in more than 30 countries around the world.

The organization posts thank-you letters from troops on its Website: www.operationpaperback.org. Web surfers can also submit troop addresses on the Web site.

Engel said that most of the books he has shipped went to the Middle East. He is taking a small break from shipping for the holidays, but will resume shortly there after, he said.

Because of issues of taste and custom, Operation Paperback will not ship romance novels or war-themed books, but Golden said that the library would sell them to benefit the library.

Golden said that library employees are grateful for the help of volunteers like Engel.

'We have a lot of volunteers and it's really wonderful people are so active in the library,' she said.

Those wishing to donate paperback books or money to Operation Paperback can do so at the circulation desk of the Emily Williston Library on Park Street.

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