



LIFE TIME COMMUNITY SERVICE AWARD

GAIL MARTINO

In 2002, I found out through a friend (Lewis Bunch, a judge in Kansas City) that a mutual friend's husband (Major Edmund J. Degen) was the Chief of Plans under General Wallace for the invasion of Iraq. I began, with the help of KPHS administration, staff, students, and especially special education teacher Alicia Violante Todaro, a Support-the-Troops program. Remembering how our troops were treated during Vietnam, we all decided not to let that happen to the Iraqi War soldiers. We began a collection. Students, staff, parents and Kings Park citizens would bring in toiletries and supplies for us to box up for the troops. Often, we would invite local politicians and the press for photo ops with our students and the boxes, in order to keep it in the fore-front of everyone's minds.

With Major Degen's help, we obtained long lists of soldiers and their overseas addresses, and began a massive school-wide campaign of sending hundreds of packages and thousands of letters. Mrs. Todaro's students were the first to receive replies – letters of extreme thanks. Awe received not only letters, but Iraqi money with Saddam Hussein's picture on them, photos and emails. We also received letters of thanks from many of the soldiers' gratefully wives who remained at the base in Germany.

In the following years, many of our Kings park teachers talked about our Support-the-Troops program to their own children, who then began similar programs in their own home districts. Sometimes we helped by supplying them with names and addresses of soldiers.

We asked the Kings Park community for names and addresses of soldiers, and sent many packages and letters to our former students, and relatives and friends of Kings Parkers. Often, they would visit us when they returned to the states, sometimes bringing flags flown over Iraq, and always bringing their thanks and appreciation.

In early 2004, the newly promoted and silver star recipient Lt. Lo. Degen, now back from Iraq and stationed in Leavenworth, Kansas, wanted to visit Kings Park High School to personally thank the students and staff for all they had done for the moral of the troops. We arranged a date in February, and set up a luncheon and an assembly, inviting not only our KPHS students and staff, but local dignitaries and most importantly, members of the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars. Ms. Todaro's students presented Lt. Col. Degen with KPHS sweat suits.

A freshman that I personally introduced to Lt. Col. Degen was SADD member Kevin Johnson, who became SADD's first Support-the-Troops Officer under SALL President Kimberly Haggerty. These two students, for four years, took over the program, and expanded it tremendously. Kevin even made appearances before the American Legion and VFW, who generously donated funds to help with the cost of mailing the packages overseas.

Recently, we have helped a chaplain begin a lending library for the soldiers stationed in Iraq. All teachers and staff helped with the collections, but Mr. Kevin Johnson, English teacher and football coach, has had his team and students collect huge amounts of supplies to send over.

Lt. Col. Degen, now full bird Colonel Degen, is currently head of all US troops stationed in Korea. He still keeps in touch with Kevin Johnston, now a ROTC student at Dickenson College, and often tells me that the kindness and generosity of Kings Park is legendary among the armed forces.

Gail was a Science Teacher @ St. Boniface Martyr School in Sea Cliff, NY from 1971 – 1981 and worked at BOCES in the Drug Rehabilitation Centers & Teenage Pregnancy Program from 1982-1987 as a Science and Health Educator, counseled drug addicts in the adolescent unit and helped found the Teenage Pregnancy Program in Nassau County. Gail worked at BOCES III as Director in the Gifted and Talented Summer Program where she designed and ran the program as well as supervised the whole staff from 1985-1989. Her final change in a career brought her to the Kings Park Central School District in 1987 as a Health Educator in the Middle and High School, SADD advisor and School photographer.