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SCHOOL CELEBRATES ARMY MAJOR'S HOMECOMING

Children had maintained contact with officer in Iraq

BY LAUREN CIRAULO • JULY 2, 2009



PHOTOS BY JEFF GRANIT staff Above: U.S. Army Maj. John Orzol and wife Anna present Goddard School owner Patrice Peschel Keeser with a plaque and an American flag that flew over the former U.S. embassy in Baghdad on Memorial Day. Below: Robert and Jillian Orzol salute the flag along with their father, Maj. Orzol, (r), during a presentation of colors.

Students, decked out in red, white and blue and humming patriotic songs, paraded through the halls of the Goddard School of South Old Bridge on a rainy summer morning.

But it was not quite Independence Day yet.

The students were celebrating the homecoming of U.S. Army Maj. John Orzol, who recently returned from Iraq. An Old Bridge resident, Orzol is the father of two Goddard School children.

“It’s really great to have him back,” said school Director Patrice Keeser. “I’ve seen a wonderful change in his children since he returned. They’re ecstatic.”

On hand for the June 18 celebration with Orzol were his wife Anna, father-in-law Kaz Kadzinski, son Robert, 4, daughter Jillian, 5, and all their classmates and teachers at the school on Englishtown Road. The celebration consisted of two parades — one for toddlers and infants and another for preschoolers and kindergartners — the latter of which held a special flag ceremony while singing “You’re a Grand Old Flag.”

“I’ve never held a flag ceremony, but I did my research and figured it out,” Keeser said. “I wanted to do something simple, yet honorary. I didn’t want this to be too overwhelming for Major Orzol.”

Patriotic rubber ducks and little red, white and blue beach balls were given to the children to add to the festive atmosphere. They were also treated to a themed lunch of pizza, watermelon and blueberries with whipped cream and Skyrocket ice pops.

“I’ve never welcomed anyone home before. But I always thought it was important to recognize our soldiers. They’ve sacrificed a lot,” said Keeser. “Most don’t get the same appreciation.”

Orzol has been a member of the Army National Guard for 22 years. He left in June 2008 for training in Texas before being deployed to Iraq. Anna, whom he married in 2001, and the children were able to visit him at Fort Bliss in August before he left in September.

Most communications between the family from that point on were through Skype technology, which Goddard School used during its first celebration for Orzol. Keesser organized that birthday party at the school on March 19 through a Skype video conference call with Orzol, who answered the students' endless questions and watched them partake in games like "pin the star on the soldier."



"We sent a personal invitation to him and

everything," Keesser said. "Most importantly, the kids were able to talk to him and understand things more. I always told them that he's just protecting the country and he'll be home soon, but it's better for them to interact with him."

But Keesser's efforts reach beyond periodic celebrations. During the time that Orzol was stationed in Iraq, the school sent care packages containing everything from Goddard School mugs to coffee cake and donuts to picture frames. Photos, memory albums and pictures of Jillian and Robert's artwork were also sent to him.

"That's what he said he missed the most. He really looked forward to seeing what they were creating next," said Keesser. "I'm just happy I can help make that happen."

After the parade, the flag used in the ceremony was hung outside the school, where it will be a reminder of Orzol's service and dedication throughout the year.