



## **Caring for orphans**

***Through parishioners and employees serving in Afghanistan, churches and companies in West Virginia team up to provide for orphaned boys.***

*By Martina Hart*

When his co-workers at international Coal Group in Charleston, West Virginia approached Major John C. “Max” Wilkinson with their idea to send care packages to him and his fellow soldiers currently serving in Afghanistan, he suggested providing help for a nearby orphanage instead.

“I told them our living conditions were not that bad,” Wilkinson recalls. “And that if they really wanted to make a difference they could help us give these orphans a better quality of life.”

Word soon spread to his friends at the Basilica of Sacred Heart and the St. Thomas More Catholic Lawyers Society, both of which Wilkinson is a member.

Around the same time, the parents of Major Fred Hill contacted him on behalf of their community at United Methodist Temple in Beckley, West Virginia, where Hill grew up, to find out what they could do to assist him and his colleagues, and received the same response.

Wilkinson and Hill serve as executive officer and operations officer with the West Virginia National Guard’s 1092nd Engineer Battalion, which is the command and control element of Task Force Red Dragon. They are stationed in Sharana, the capital of the Paktika Province in southeastern Afghanistan, near the border with Pakistan. The task force is made up of engineer companies and smaller units, approximately 900 soldiers from Kansas, Hawaii, Montana, Massachusetts, New York, Louisiana, Connecticut and West Virginia.

They have an excellent rapport with the Sharana orphanage and its director, Mr. Khan, a relationship they inherited from their predecessor, the 877th Engineer Battalion from the Alabama National Guard. The orphanage is home to about 40 boys ranging from 5 to 15 years of age. It is estimated that 200 orphans, some of whom come from outlying villages, live in town.

“Their living conditions are austere,” Wilkinson says. “All share a single room in the current orphanage building, sleep on a blanket on the floor, and essentially have nothing other than the clothes on their backs.”

The children receive lessons at the orphanage and, when old enough, attend a local school. They eat a rice-based diet and only have rudimentary medical care.

“Our medics provide periodic clinic services to advise who needs more serious medical attention, which the orphanage coordinates with the local hospital,” Wilkinson explains.

Work has begun on a new one-story orphanage building, which will be able to accommodate up to 100 orphans in eight dorm rooms. It will also have two classrooms, two offices, a library, kitchen, laundry and a shower-latrine. Afghan students participating in the Engineer Skills Development Workshop receive on-the-job training in the construction site, and the bricks are manufactured in the neighboring province of Ghazni, boosting the regional economy.

After determining what the children currently living in the orphanage would need most, Ann Weimer at the Basilica of the Sacred Heart, Joy Hill and Mary Thomas at United Methodist Temple, and Karen Berrian at ICG coordinated the project within each community and among the three.

Basilica people filled 17 boxes with shirts, pants, shoes and other essential items, as well as recreational equipment such as soccer balls and volleyballs. Monetary donations, including those from the Knights of Columbus, were used to purchase additional items and pay for shipping.

“It was exciting just coming together and trying to learn a little bit more about Afghanistan, what our troops are actually doing over there,” said Weimer.

“Those who were involved in sorting, gathering and packing had lots of questions and were trying to envision what the boys would look like in the clothes.”

Members of the United Methodist Temple sent winter jackets, gloves and about 80 blankets made by children during their Vacation Bible School.

“It was both heartwarming and overwhelming to witness the generosity and love of our members who joined in to clothe and help complete strangers in another part of the world,” Hill said.

“It is a blessing to know that God’s love allows us to reach out to strangers in a land where there is war and that our reaching out can be used by God to help bring about peace,” Thomas added. “It is awesome to see the smiles on the faces of these Afghan children, as they know that others care for them.”

ICG employees filled nine boxes with clothes, including baseball uniforms and also gloves, bats, balls and bases. “To raise funds the company had a ‘Red, White and Blue Big Denim Day,’ where employees paid to wear jeans and/or tennis shoes to work,” explains Berrian. “We are proud of the work Max is doing in Afghanistan and his interest in helping the children living in the orphanage.”

The packages left West Virginia at the end of September and arrived at Sharana a couple of weeks later, still in time for baseball tutorials. “The kids were ecstatic,” Wilkinson reports, after he and his fellow soldiers returned from distributing the gifts, noting that even the orphanage director was visibly touched. “He is usually pretty stoic, but his face lit up in huge smiles several times when the kids reacted to the gifts.”

Wilkinson says that it has been a great opportunity for Christians and Muslims to work together. “I told Mr. Khan that the Christian Holy Bible, as the Muslim Holy Qur’an, commands that we care for the orphan,” he says. “And that the Christians who sent the gifts were honored to assist in love for these orphans alongside their Muslim friends.”