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Monday May 21, 2007

News

Students meet their corpsman

By JUDI BOWERS

He seemed more like a celebrity than a guy in camouflage fatigues.

Scraps of paper and pencils were shoved in his face as fans crowded around Sgt. Jose Acosta. His fans were short, the pencils grubby and worn down, and the paper torn from homework, tests or anything they could find. To the students of Big Bear Elementary School, Acosta is a hero. And that spells celebrity in their books.

Sgt. Jose Acosta signs autographs for Big Bear Elementary School students during a visit May 2. (JUDI BOWERS/Big Bear Grizzly)

Last Thanksgiving, teacher Alison McPherson got Acosta's name from an organization that supports military personnel. She had EarlyAct Club members start writing letters to him. He is a Navy corpsman, and at the time he was stationed in Iraq. While the project started with the EarlyAct Club, Big Bear Elementary School students bought into the idea of their own Navy corpsman in a big way. They wrote letters, sent gifts and care packages until Valentine's Day when Acosta was scheduled to come home to the states.

But the students always wondered if Acosta was real. Acosta was an enigma. The youngsters sent him things and McPherson assured them the letters and gifts were mailed and received. On May 2, Acosta became a reality when he drove from San Diego, where he is stationed, to visit the students who were so kind to him.

Acosta wore a smile matching the size of the students'. He visited individual classrooms, then made his way to the playground's amphitheater where a number of students waited impatiently for him to speak. But first he presented the school with a gift.

Acosta learned of 1st Lt. Jared Landaker's death when Landaker was shot down on Feb. 7 in Iraq on a mission to rescue injured soldiers. Landaker was raised in Big Bear, and the Marine's death rocked the Big Bear Valley community. McPherson e-mailed Acosta, who was stationed right across from Landaker's unit. Both soldiers' missions were related—helping the injured.

Learning of Landaker's death and how it impacted the students who had adopted him, Acosta obtained an American flag and had it flown with Landaker's unit. The flag was certified and presented to Big Bear Elementary School when Acosta visited. Landaker's nephew, Trevor who is a student at the school, accepted the flag on behalf of Big Bear Elementary.

As a Navy corpsman with Marine Wing Support Squadron 373, Acosta provides medical care for injured Marines, he told the students. He said he and his fellow corpsmen have the proper gear to protect themselves. They drive ambulances and Humvees, and do carry weapons.

Acosta's uniform bears an insignia that the students wanted to know about. It signifies the

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history of the Navy working with the Marines, Acosta said about the Fleet Marine Force insignia. The insignia is earned, Acosta said, after considerable study and training.

Gracious and very appreciative, Acosta said he didn't expect the reaction or to be treated like a celebrity. He just wanted to show his appreciation for the letters and gifts the kids sent him.

The EarlyAct Club will be sending letters and packages to the medics from Landaker's unit still in Iraq, McPherson said.

Students meet their corpsman

By JUDI BOWERS

Thursday, May 10, 2007 9:44 AM PDT

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