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With a Charity for Soldiers, Youths Make Recycling Pay

By ARIEL SABAR

NORWELL, Mass., March 27 — Their bedrooms are strewn with the everyday flotsam of a teenager's life: heaps of unfolded laundry and a bottle of "passion" red nail polish, muddy soccer cleats and the box for Madden N.F.L. 2002, a video game.

But after a long day at school, after softball and chorus and cheerleading, Brittany Bergquist, 16, and her brother, Robbie, 15, come home to an extracurricular activity remarkable even among the high-achieving teenagers in this well-to-do Boston suburb: They run a nonprofit — with a hand from their parents — that has raised \$1 million for phone cards for American troops overseas.

They started the charity, Cell Phones for Soldiers, nearly three years ago with far smaller ambitions. Before school one morning, a few days after a cousin deployed to Baghdad, they watched a news story on television about a Massachusetts soldier struggling to pay off more than \$7,000 in charges for cellphone calls home from the Persian Gulf.

"It really hit home because we had a cousin serving overseas," Brittany recalled Tuesday evening, between softball practice and an honor-society induction ceremony. "We felt it was kind of our duty to make a difference."

She and Robbie pooled \$14 from their piggy banks and collected another \$7 from classmates. The opening of an account at a local bank, which donated \$500 to the cause, was followed by a bake sale, a yard sale and a car wash outside Town Hall.

Their plan to help that one soldier broadened when the pair heard that recyclers paid for used cellphones. They began by asking friends for old phones. Within weeks, Brittany, Robbie and their parents had persuaded local shops, police stations and government offices to set out recycling bins.

Three years later, the Bergquists' recycling network spans more than 4,000 drop-off sites located in every state and in England, Canada and Japan, and yields some 20,000 cellphones a month, which fetch an average of \$5 each from a Michigan recycling company that refurbishes them for resale.

The shipments from Cell Phones for Soldiers are "an equivalent quantity to what some of the national chains are bringing in from their customer recycling programs," said Mike Newman, a vice president at the recycling company, ReCellular Inc., whose clients also include Sprint, Verizon Wireless and Best Buy.

With the recycling proceeds and some cash donations, the Bergquists buy phone cards worth up to 60 minutes each in international calls. They send the cards to service members and their families or military units that place requests through the charity's Web site, cellphonesforsoldiers.com.

Nearly 400,000 cards have shipped. That number is expected to grow sharply over the next few months, when AT&T Inc. makes a few hundred of its Cingular stores nationwide official drop-off sites.

Though the family gets some envelope-stuffing help from volunteers, there is no paid staff. Bob and Gail Bergquist — both public school teachers — and their children handle much of the work from home.

“This is the shipping and receiving and communications center,” Mr. Bergquist said, leaning against a kitchen island where the family gathers evenings over separate laptops to reply to e-mail.

“It’s incredibly gratifying to see the kids doing what they’re doing,” he added, “but they just can’t handle it all. Eventually, we’re going to have to hire someone full time.”

On Tuesday, the Bergquists opened an e-mail message — one of more than 50 they get most days — from Sgt. First Class Luis Arzadon, 42, of San Gabriel, Calif., a helicopter mechanic with an Army medevac unit in [Iraq](#).

“I want to let you know that although we don’t know each other, I am extremely proud of you,” Sergeant Arzadon wrote, thanking Brittany and Robbie for helping him stay in touch with his wife and two sons. “I couldn’t do what you have done thus far in touching peoples lives.”

Robbie says messages like Sergeant Arzadon’s keep him inspired, even if he thinks wistfully sometimes of friends whiling away afternoons playing video games.

“Brittany and I get tear-jerkers every single day,” he said as he and his sister ripped open boxes of donated cellphones in the foyer of their family’s three-story colonial-style home. “For us to give them a lifeline to their family keeps us motivated.”

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