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WEST SPRINGFIELD - A

Barefoot girl stands, her hands clasped in front, a smile beams and her eyes shine from her dusty face. Her dress looks like a sewing project gone awry, a reject from a Goodwill collection bin. Another girl, a white scarf draped around her head, peeks out from a mud-brick ruin, holding a balloon. Children watch as one child blows bubbles, wand dipped in a bottle held by a United States soldier.

The soldier in the photo is West Springfield native and Army Capt. Daniel J. Burkhart, and the children are refugees in Kabul, Afghanistan. Burkhart is stationed at Camp Eggers, in the heart of Kabul, Afghanistan. His work is with the Combined Security Transition Command Afghanistan, whose mission is to train and equip the Afghan Security Forces. He is an adviser to the Afghan Border Police, which is responsible for policing more than 5,000 kilometers of volatile and arduous terrain, with only 8,000 soldiers. But it is work that he does with a grass-roots, humanitarian group that has most affected Burkhart and his feelings for the country in which he is serving.

"It has been one of the defining experiences of my time here," Burkhart said in a telephone interview from Afghanistan. Dubbed the Voluntary Community Relations Project, or VCR for short, the program was started by an Army chaplain who was moved by the plight of the Afghan people. An estimated 3,600 refugees live in camps or settlements in bombed out buildings in Kabul. Families come from all over Afghanistan, where their homes were destroyed by fighting.

The program consists of military personnel who volunteer time for this humanitarian effort by making visits to refugee camps and schools, distributing supplies sent to the troops from friends and family in the United States. Burkhart, 27, became involved in the program May, when a friend couldn't make it to lunch because he was going to be distributing supplies to the Afghans. Burkhart joined the friend the next week, and he was hooked.

"The first time I went out, we visited a camp north of Kabul in a very desolate area. I remember stepping out of my vehicle and thinking I might as well have been on the moon. Brown sand and dust were visible in all directions as far as the eye could see, and there was no visible water source," he said. "When the

Afghans came out to meet us, my heart really ached for them. The kids were so happy and were playing around like kids anywhere would do. The adults, on the other hand, were reminiscent of the environment they lived in. Their faces were deeply weathered and appeared to be older than they actually were.

The camp consisted of makeshift mud huts and tents. Even as we were unloading the clothing and supplies to give to the Afghans, I felt as though it would barely scratch the surface of meeting their needs." Still, it's worth the effort, and Burkhart said he gets as much as he gives. "It reminds me of how blessed we are as Americans and how much we take for granted. It has given me a chance to interact with a foreign culture and a foreign people and to see that we are not really all that different," he said. "It has been a privilege to be the conduit through which the goodwill and generosity of the American people have been poured. And it has given me memories and experiences I will not soon forget of an amazing group of people."

Burkhart's mother, Sandra J. Burkhart, is one of the Americans who send over packages to Afghanistan. She combs the tables of tag sales and church rummage sales for the most needed items, she said. She's proud of what her eldest son has accomplished and proud of the man he has become. "He's really passionate about it," she said in an interview in her West Springfield home. She explained that effort is a lot more involved than just receiving goods and distributing them. The soldiers have to reconnoiter the area first, determine what the needs of people are, arrange for vehicles and security, then travel to give out the items.

A graduate of West Point, Burkhart has been stationed in Afghanistan since January [2007]. He also served in Iraq. While in the service, he married Leah, who is from Oregon, and the couple now has an 8-month-old daughter, Cami. He and his wife have been together only 27 out of the 40 months of their marriage.

He's due to return from Afghanistan before the end of January [2008]. "I can't wait," he said. Being away for the holidays, especially with a young family state-side, is the toughest part of what he does, Burkhart said. "I have missed my first and second wedding anniversaries during this deployment, and my daughter was born about half-way through it. I was able to be come for her birth, but walking away from my wife as she held our 6-day-old daughter in order to return to Afghanistan was the single most difficult thing I have ever done," he said. "The

holidays remind me of how blessed I am to have a family that has stood by my side through this trying time. I ache to be with them more than I can describe, but knowing that I am missed and loved and that I have a family to come home to is a source of great comfort."

While missing his own family and the delights of seeing his daughter grow and change, Burkhart also gains comfort in his work through VCR, he said. "The children, to me, are the defining experience of this program. They are full of life and such a joy to be around. They remind me that, in spite of all the brokenness and destruction in Afghanistan, there is still hope. They represent to me the future of this nation," Burkhart said. "It's my hope that years from now, as adults, they will remember the Americans who came and spent an hour playing football (soccer) with them.

I want their experiences with us to be more lasting and more powerful than the messages they are undoubtedly receiving from the Taliban and other extremist groups," he said.