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## Helping and healing

By TONY MARRERO [Imarrero@hernandotoday.com](mailto:Imarrero@hernandotoday.com)

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MASARYKTOWN — Sgt. Lea Mills was such a dependable part of his unit of that one of his Marine buddies gave him a nickname.

"He called him the 'Swiss Army Knife,'" recalled Lea's mother, Dee Mills. "Whatever C Company needed, he found a way to make it happen."

Lea (pronounced "Lee"), a 2002 graduate of Hernando High School, was killed April 28 by a roadside bomb while on patrol in Anbar province of Iraq.

Now Dee Mills is trying to be reliable in a similar way for her son's comrades and many other men and women still serving in the war zones — and she is finding solace in the effort.

Mills is collecting funds to send care packages to military personnel in Iraq and Afghanistan and to the wounded in military hospitals.

She calls the campaign "Lea's Prayers and Postage."

"This is a healer for me," Mills said Friday as she stood in the tiny Masaryktown post office on U.S. 41, photos of Lea looking down on her from a bulletin board that has become a memorial to the community's lost son.

"Those kids with Lea that day are still getting into a Hummer after that experience, stressing every inch of the way," Mills said. "If they know I can be strong, it will give them the strength to get through this."

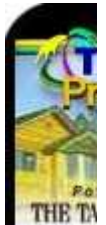
Mills has collected some \$8,000 in recent months and helped send just more than 150 packages.

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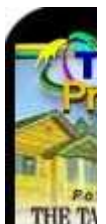
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She has joined forces with Ed and Maxine Kolbe, a Brookridge couple rallying that retirement community to send supplies to troops and donate money for postage.

The Kolbes use a Web site, [www.anysoldier.com](http://www.anysoldier.com), which helps senders direct care packages to specific troops serving overseas in all branches of the military. The troops themselves post what they'd like to receive.

On Thursday, the couple sent their 220th package. Many of the recent packages — full of everything from socks to toiletries — were sent using postage money from Lea's fund.

The help comes at a good time, Maxine said.

"We have so many residents away and all our clubs are closed for the summer so donations aren't coming in," she said. "Dee has become my new best friend."

The Mills fund also has paid to send packages donated by Campers Holiday Travel Park in Brooksville.

"I know there are other groups out there that we could be helping," Dee said.

But it will take more donations, because the postage money goes out as quickly as it comes in.

"I'm not going to quit until the well dries up," she said.

#### 'What he would have wanted'

Lea, known as a kind, outgoing Southern gentlemen with a gift for fixing things, would have turned 22 yesterday, July 1. Had he been home, Dee said the birthday celebration would have been a familiar one.

"I would have baked him a German chocolate cake, just like always," she said, a set of Lea's dog tags and a silver cross dangling from her neck.

Instead, Lea's body lies in the family plot in White Plains Cemetery in Mississippi.

Dee expected the day to be a difficult one, as will every birthday and holiday for as long as she lives.

But, she said, "It's a choice each person can make each day. You can celebrate your loved one's life, or you can mourn your loved one's death. I choose to celebrate, because that's what Lea would have wanted."

Dee said her husband Rob, an assistant director at the Hernando County Airport, has been a pillar of support, too.

"He's been so strong for me," she said.

The couple has another son, Parker, who will be a senior at Nature Coast Technical High School in the fall.

Dee worries about Lea's widow Keesha, who is still at Camp Pendleton, where Lea was stationed. Keesha, Lea's high school sweetheart, plans to remain there until Lea's unit returns home in late September or early October.

Dee fights tears as she talks about the 19-year-old.

"It's very hard to be on base and see everyone in uniform, and to pass by the last place she dropped (Lea) off before he left for Iraq," she said. "But she's trying to be strong for Lea."

The letters and e-mails from troops who received the packages also are a solace.

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"I live for the mailbox," Dee said. "I go out every day hoping to get a letter from Lea's buddies. It's a treasure."

This e-mail was sent to the Kolbes by Staff Sgt. Scot Juntikka, a Marine serving in Iraq. The couple had shared with the soldier the story of the Mills' loss and the campaign to raise money for postage:

"If you get a chance to pass onto the family of the fallen son," Juntikka wrote, "tell them that we are all pushing on to complete the mission."

Reporter Tony Marrero can be contacted at 352-544-5286.

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