

Mobilizing a **Community**

By Kevin Fritz

Sending candy and care packages to the military have become this high-schooler's passion.

A piece of candy. A human life. Connecting the two may seem far-fetched, but to **Andrew Weinstock**, a 17-year-old **Winter Park** resident and junior at Trinity Preparatory School, the two perfectly complement one another. In fact this year, he is hoping to send approximately three tons — 6,000 pounds — of candy to Operation Gratitude headquarters in Van Nuys, California, for distribution to troops overseas.

He got the idea in 2009 when he heard that dentists were paying kids one dollar to donate their candy at Halloween for care packages.

“Why pay?” asks Andrew. “Kids would donate it anyway.” So, for the first year he set a goal of collecting 50 pounds and ended up with 911 pounds. Then he learned that troops sometimes offer the candy to children to discover the whereabouts of bombs and snipers as they enter hostile areas.

“It seems so crazy,” Andrew says, “that a piece of candy can save a soldier’s life.”

While Operation Gratitude does not have official chapters, Andrew decided to form Operation Gratitude Orlando on his own. Why not? He holds the distinction of being the top donor of any individual in the program, says **Carolyn Blashek**, founder of Operation Gratitude, which has sent 850,000 care packages filled with hygiene items, candy and letters of appreciation to soldiers serving overseas since 2003.

Blashek says the candy is used as filler after all items are placed into care packages. But it turned out to be more than just a Styrofoam peanut replacement.

“We had no idea it would be used to save lives,” she says. “We were just trying to fill boxes.”

She says she was inspired by a soldier to start Operation Gratitude ten years ago while working at a Naval base. “Today, it is someone like Andrew who inspires me. He is an extraordinary young man.”

The support of Winter Park Fire Chief Captain **James White** has been instrumental in making the project a success over the past three years.

In 2010, Andrew collected 4,300 pounds followed by 5,600 pounds of sweets in 2011. U-Haul donates the boxes and a couple weeks after Halloween, it is packing day at the Weinstock home. Winter Park firefighters, military reservists, school principals, and volunteers from all walks of life converge on the home.

After collecting candy again next year, Andrew plans to go to college and study business, noting he already got his feet wet running Operation Gratitude. “He has always had this ‘do the right thing attitude,’” says Andrew’s mother, **Jody**. “It has been an enormous teaching tool in our lives. He has really touched people.”

Last year, a local Marine dropped off his medal of honor for Andrew, telling Andrew he was the real hero. Soon thereafter, a civilian living in Qatar on an air base got wind of Andrew’s work and sent him an American flag from a battle in which no one was killed — the highest honor bestowed on a civilian. **L**



Andrew Weinstock with a military member.

COURTESY OF ANDREW WEINSTOCK

To donate candy or other items to Operation Gratitude, visit CentralFloridaLifestyle.com.