

Charlotte.com

Posted on Thu, Nov. 09, 2006

**NONPROFIT WORKS TO SUPPORT TROOPS****Flag effort leads to meeting at White House****CELESTE SMITH**[cesmith@charlotteobserver.com](mailto:cesmith@charlotteobserver.com)

It started with a photo taken from a friend's yard.

Days after 9-11, in the pain shared by so many throughout the country, Eileen Schwartz took a photo of a flying American flag. The healing image gave her a sense of peace and strength. So she took another photo.

And another.

Family, friends, strangers joined in. Then came Flags Across the Nation.

It's the name Schwartz picked for the effort that soon drew kids, schools and businesses nationally on board. In San Diego, where Schwartz lived then, the volunteer grass-roots group sponsored photo exhibits around town. When Schwartz moved from San Diego to the Southbrook neighborhood off Rea Road in 2004, the flags effort followed.

And grew.

From photographs, Flags Across the Nation moved toward promoting and collecting children's patriotic artwork. The young artists' works are displayed, like the "Red, White and You" exhibit now at ImaginOn children's library in uptown Charlotte. The artwork also is converted to T-shirts, quilt displays and cards sold to raise money for care packages going to troops overseas and veterans in the States.

Troops started asking for flags, too, which Schwartz requests from businesses. Military members want to fly the flags on missions, then send them back to Schwartz to distribute as honorable, symbolic gestures of thanks to supporters.

It's an effort fueled solely by Schwartz, a 61-year-old retired teacher; by volunteers who know her or find her on the Web site; and by donations. And while the nonprofit has generated several thousand dollars to cover postage and other costs for troops, Schwartz also pulls from her own pocket to cover some expenses.

That alone might be enough to make anyone else feel like their work is going unnoticed.

Then the invitation came.

President Bush heard about the work Schwartz and other nonprofit groups do through "America Supports You," an organization of grass-roots supporters -- like Flags Across the Nation -- that's organized by the Department of Defense.

The president wanted to meet Schwartz and nine other groups to thank them for helping American troops.

Set aside what you might think about the war, the national elections or politics, thought Schwartz, a self-described registered Democrat.

This is about what she and other volunteers do to help American military abroad. And about remembering veterans -- not only on Veterans Day coming Saturday, but beyond that.

And most heartwarming to her, the invite was about the president's appreciation of volunteers.

So Schwartz traveled to Washington on Oct. 20, with the financial help of Waxhaw's American Legion Post 208, which gave Schwartz a cap to give to Bush.

In the Roosevelt room with other invited guests, they all stood as the president walked in.

Standing second from last, Schwartz waited her turn. Then she shook the president's hand. He returned her smile and warm gaze.

"Oh, it's wonderful meeting you," Schwartz told him.

Later, Bush asked about her grandchildren. He was so welcoming that Schwartz had to remind herself that she was in the White House.

Bush thanked the group for caring so much about America and the troops and asked them to continue showing support, because the tough war in Iraq was going to get tougher.

Then Bush surprised them with medallions bearing the Presidential Seal.

On it, there's an American bald eagle bearing a shield with red and white stripes, and a blue bar above it.

Just like the flag.

### **Want to Get Involved?**

One of the latest projects of Flags Across The Nation, which promotes patriotism through the arts, is asking volunteers to create or buy blankets for wounded military members. To find out about this or other opportunities to get involved or make donations, contact Eileen Schwartz at 704-654-8529; or [eileen@flagsacrossthenation.org](mailto:eileen@flagsacrossthenation.org). Read more at [www.flagsacrossthenation.org](http://www.flagsacrossthenation.org).

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