



# Staten Island Advance

## "Getting letters and packages, even from someone you don't know -- it helps."

**Close to 700 people attend the event which is expected to raise more than \$100,000 for soldiers overseas**

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By **TEVAH PLATT**

**ADVANCE STAFF WRITER**

As he served in Iraq this year, Marine Lance Cpl. Shane Strassberg received packages stuffed with food and photographs, MP3s of Bruce Springsteen and a bag of New Brighton leaves from his front yard.

"When I opened it, I smelled the leaves and had memories of being home in the fall, raking the leaves and being with family," said Strassberg, 24. "Getting letters and packages, even from someone you don't know -- it helps."

Staten Island Project Homefront, an umbrella

service group that sends monthly care packages to soldiers abroad, will be able to send a lot more support to Richmond County troops after last night's Comedy Nite fund-raiser at the Hilton Garden Inn in Bloomfield. The event, which drew nearly 700 people, was expected to raise more than \$100,000, which will also help serve wounded soldiers returning from combat.

"Our message is that we support our troops 100 percent," said Project Homefront chair Gale Strassberg, who is Shane's mother. "Whether or not we support the war or our president, we are supporting the soldiers who are risking their lives every day for our freedoms."

The event was also the venue of a communications link established via satellite between the hotel and the Taji military base in Iraq.

Sgt. Henry Stucken of Pleasant Plains blew kisses to his family and threw his head back when he laughed. For the 10 family members gathered tearfully around the live feed, seeing Stucken's tan and smile was rare and "that time was priceless."



Executive Director of Freedom Calls Foundation, John Harlow II, introduces 700 assembled guests to soldiers in a live video conference from Camp Taji and Al Asad Airbase in Iraq.

## **'REINFORCE FAITH'**

"We all needed this morale boost," said Stucken's wife, Fernanda, whose children, aged 5 and 3, clutched stuffed animals he had mailed from the base. "The kids need to remember. And we reinforce each other's faith."

The reunion was arranged by John Harlow II of the Freedom Calls Foundation, a Brooklyn-based nonprofit organization that puts soldiers in three camps in Iraq in touch with family members nationwide.

Addressing the crowd at the fund-raiser, Stucken said, "Thank you for what you're doing. We're still going strong, and I'm looking forward to my first cold beer when I get back."

Among the tables in the hotel's ballroom were police and firefighters, lawyers and Realtors, teachers and St. Peter's High School students, and members of various community organizations. The Marine Corps League served as the color guard.

"To help someone so far away is very rewarding," said Mark Endozo, president of St. Peter's Interact Community Group.

Following a three-course meal, last night's entertainment included a lineup of comedians -- John Ganci, Joe Lecesse, Robin Fox, Nanci Richards, Josh Spear, Randi Kaplan, Ariel Sinclair, Chelsea Raynes and John Pizzi.

## **DONATIONS, RAFFLES**

Donations and various raffles were expected to double the total of \$55,000 raised prior to the event.

Accepting a \$4,000 check from the Knights of Columbus Manresa Council, New Dorp Beach, executive director John (Jack) Semich announced that Project Homefront has arranged to pay the postage on any package mailed to soldiers in Iraq or Afghanistan from the Manor Road Post Office "for as long as we have the money to do so."

Semich said last night's fund-raiser was the culmination of a single question posed last year in the American Veterans Post 103: "What if we could help these soldiers and families?"

"There are so many people who care for us and want us to be safe," Shane Strassberg said.

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