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Photo submitted by ROSEMARY MARTINEZ

Mary Immaculate Catholic School students display books they collected for the United Service Organizations in a recent book drive. The students donated \$1,200 in new books.

Drive collects children's books for service members, families

By ROSEMARY MARTINEZ
Contributor

Students from Mary Immaculate Catholic School in Farmers Branch shared their love of reading and their respect for the U.S. armed forces by hosting a book drive to support the troops and their families.

Every day, roughly 150 troops leave Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport to deploy to Iraq or Afghanistan. The United Through Reading program, offered through the United Service Organizations at D/FW Airport, provides an opportunity for deployed service members to choose new books for their children.

The service members record DVDs of them reading the book. Then the book and recorded DVD are mailed home, so children can watch and spend time with their loved ones.

"It helps kids keep in touch and to understand that their parents love them even though they are off doing something good for their country," said sixth-grader Maeve Kaiser, a Coppell resident.

The Mary Immaculate School students enjoyed picking out new copies of favorite children's books to send to the service members.

"The DVD is good for them to watch so they feel loved and appreciated — so we need to give them some appreciation too," sixth-grader Trent Holland said.

Sixth-grade teacher Sara Cusick championed the efforts at Mary Immaculate after hearing of the United Through Reading program. The program hits close to home for the English teacher because her

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husband, son and son-in-law all have been members of the U.S. armed forces.

"I know from my own family's experiences how difficult deployments are on the service member's children and spouse," Cusick said. "The opportunity to be part of the children's daily routine by reading a bedtime story is a precious gift, not only for the children but for the spouse as well."

The school librarian, Karen Saldana, also felt a connection to the community service project.

"When Mrs. Cusick mentioned to me that she wanted to hold a book drive for the USO, I immediately was on board," Saldana said. "I had spent my life up to age 21 as a dependent of a 30-year Army officer and then had married an Army officer as well. I am very aware of the many sacrifices our soldiers and their families make."

The book drive collected \$1,200 in new books, which were presented to the USO at the end of February.

"The response from the students and their families was wonderful," Saldana said. "As the students became aware of this great program, they embraced how special it is and made the book drive a success."

Rosemary Martinez contributes to neighborsgo.com on behalf of Mary Immaculate Catholic School in Farmers Branch, which draws students from Coppell.