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## Austin Children, Artwork Show Support for Troops

By Chief Master Sgt. Gonda Moncada / Texas National Guard Public Affairs

**AUSTIN, Texas, June 21, 2005** - Children gathered on the steps of the state capitol June 14 to show support for deployed troops.

Sculptor Heather McMahan's Art for Soldiers, Children's Courtyard, the Texas National Guard, and KVUE television news anchor Tyler Sieswerda presented the "It's Flag Day! ... Thank a Soldier" event.

Ms. McMahan, known for her "Welcome Home" sculpture, which has been displayed in the Pentagon and at Bergstrom International Airport, invited Austin children to express their feelings about the war and show their support for the troops through art.

The art was displayed in the main corridor at the capitol, but before the public had a chance to admire the exhibition, they were invited to the steps outside where the Pledge of Allegiance was recited, and freckle-faced musician Lauren Beller sang her heart-breaking rendition of "A Soldier's Prayer."

Jeff Beller, Lauren's father, said he was inspired to write the song because he realized he was blessed to spend every day with his daughter whereas Soldiers and Airmen often miss huge chunks of their children's lives because of overseas deployments. The song is available on CD, and according to the Bellers' Web site, 10 percent of the proceeds from the CD goes to The Fallen Patriots Fund to help the families of veterans in need.

After Lauren sang and accompanied herself on her ukulele, spectators showed their appreciation for her and the song through a prolonged applause.

Sculptor McMahan explained that she started the "Art for Soldiers" project after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, which moved her to create a sculpture depicting a set of boots, helmet and goggles discarded in the sand.

"The haphazard arrangement of the items in the sculpture is intentional," Ms. McMahan said.

"It's presented to appear as if the boots and the helmet and goggles are just thrown off." She added that her idea was that the Soldier had just gotten word of pending leave and had hurried home.

Evidently she struck a chord with her artwork. One individual who saw her artwork at the airport wrote:

"My husband and I were in Austin airport last week and saw your Welcome Home piece. It is wonderful. We were in Texas to visit our son at Fort Hood. He just got back from an 11-month deployment to Iraq. The boots and helmet are such simple things, but are very important pieces of equipment to a soldier. Now you have given me a different way to look at them in your sculpture.

I have to tell you a story about my son's boots," the letter continued. "I was moving them while I was cleaning and happened to look at the bottom of them. Written in permanent marker was O-POS, his blood type. It really hit me hard as I realized why they were marked. This was a difficult year for our family as we waited for our son (and only child) to come home. It's nice to know that others were thinking of our Soldiers too. Keep up the good work."

From this response and others Ms. McMahan received, the thought was born that children might need to express their feelings about the war and show support for the troops as well, and Flag Day 2005 was the appropriate backdrop for the art exhibition.

The children at the event showed they were aware of the sacrifices Soldiers and Airmen were making. One child told of his grandfather's experiences in World War II, and another said very solemnly: "I get angry with other kids when they don't pay attention when the Pledge of Allegiance is being recited."

The children's art pieces, many depicting red, white and blue colors, will be sent to the Soldiers overseas.



Heather McMahan's "Welcome Home" sculpture depicts boots helmet and goggles left in the sand. Photo by 2nd Lt. Amy B. Bombassaro



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