

Press Release
City of Perris

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Perris Mayor Attends Visit by Marines to St. James Catholic School

PERRIS, Calif. (February 13, 2020) — Perris Mayor Michael M. Vargas participated in a heartwarming event on Wednesday, February 12, 2020 when Marines of the 3rd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment out of Camp Pendleton paid a visit to the St. James Catholic School in Perris.

The Marines had arranged a visit to the school with Principal Tom Strickland to express their gratitude to the students, who had previously sent handwritten letters to the Marines while they had been deployed at the Southwest Border mission in recent months.



During the visit, the Marines showed off their gear and explained various military exercises while deployed. Students were able to interact with the Marines, try on field packs and even share chow with the Marines on the St. James Campus.

“This is so important because it helps our children understand that freedom isn’t free,” said Vargas. “We have men and women on the front lines protecting our freedom and programs like this teach our young people to be grateful for their sacrifice.”



Vargas mentioned how interactions such as with the 3-1 Marines and the St. James students can have a lasting impact.

“To have the chance to try on their gear and talk with them in person – that is something that will stay with them for a while,” said Vargas.

Vargas continued, “These interactions also help the students remember that their care packages are going to real people and that helps build community.”

Vargas commended Strickland for his efforts, addressing the students and the Marines/ “We need more of this,” said Vargas. “Thank you for teaching this to our students.”

Strickland was inspired to do this for the Marines after seeing how much a care package and a few thoughts from home meant to his own son, a medical corpsman, who had received such packages while deployed. Strickland’s father was also a Captain in the Navy, and with so much patriotism in his own family, it has been important for him to teach young people the value of appreciating our service members.

“A lot of times we only hear of the military in a negative context or a horrific event,” said Strickland. “But I wanted to impress upon these children about all the good things they are doing that many civilians never know about.”



In 2019, Strickland and the St. James students sent out more than 275 boxes to service members, which was a proud accomplishment considering the school holds an enrollment of 140 students, K-8th grade.

After receiving those packages while deployed on a ship, one of the officers came to Perris and visited the school and thanked the children. Seeing an officer in uniform made a huge impression on the children, who were excited to see a real-life hero return just to thank them in person.

This was a sign: Strickland had to do more.

Strickland began calling around local military installations to ask how he could continue the program at St. James by working with other service members. He made contact with Barbara Greenbush at Camp Pendleton, who could put Strickland in touch with the Marines of the 3rd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment.

“We couldn’t have done this without Barbara,” said Strickland. “I owe her a lot of gratitude too.”

After making care packages, Strickland took the 43-mile trip down to Camp Pendleton.

“Our students made the cards and packages and I was able to hand-deliver them to Marines,” said Strickland.



The Marines and Greenbush were grateful, and Strickland recalled how they wanted to do something in return, saying, “Barbara asked me, ‘What can we do for you. How can we say thanks?’”

Strickland asked if Greenbush could coordinate to send out some Marines to pay a visit to the students and Greenbush happily agreed, asking in return for timelines and directions only.

Marine Corporal Christopher Woods of the 3rd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment was happy to visit the school to say thank you to the students.



“Most care packages we receive overseas can be from so many months back and you never meet the person sending them,” said the Chandler, Arizona native. “We are always grateful for those, but these packages and cards from the St. James students were special.”

Strickland was thrilled, but also a bit surprised.

“I was amazed and stunned they agreed,” said Strickland. “This has been a work in progress, but it has been great for the kids. I honestly wish more schools would get involved with programs like this.”

Strickland emphasized how the main priority is to teach the students about applying their faith in practical terms.

“We are not doing this for publicity,” said Strickland. “Our students are learning to put their faith in practice, with practical terms by creating the boxes and cards and sending them out.”

This was the first visit by the Marines, who are slated to deploy over the summer. Strickland says the students will continue to send packages to their new heroes during the fall.

Woods and the other Marines of the 3rd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment said these were some of the first care packages they received that were up to date. They were able to match up students’ letters to the children’s faces, which made it more personal.

Said Woods, “I have a daughter, so to get a handwritten note from a kid touches my heart, brings me back to home and takes you away from the seriousness of what we do, just for a little bit.”

“I have kids here today that wrote me a letter three months ago when we were on the Southwest Border mission,” said Woods. “I get to meet them today and say, ‘Hey, I know you like volleyball. How is that going?’”

The Marines will certainly have some rough days ahead. But for at least one day, they can share a few smiles with some kids who think the world of them.

Strickland, Vargas and the 3rd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment have all witnessed firsthand how interactions like these can change a child's life. But in reality, it just might change their own.

“It opens communication, which is important for them and important for the guys too,” said Woods. “It is so easy for guys to get lost in what we do, but kids just lighten everything up and make things a little bit easier.”



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