

# Iraqi, U.S. Kids Exchange Letters, Tell About Life in Their Countries

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**Iraqi students hold letters and postcards sent from American children from Boston and Maine, which include post cards and different photos showing America and its way of life. Photo by: Cpl. Bryce C.K. Muhlenberg.**

**HABBANIYAH** — Just four years ago, Capt. Brian Von Kraus, now commander of Headquarters and Support Company, 1st Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment, Regimental Combat Team 6, was a platoon commander, fighting a kinetic war against insurgent forces here in Anbar.

Serving in 2004 at the forefront of clandestine military operations, Von Kraus witnessed the worst of what the enemy could throw at a Marine unit. During one complex attack, initiated by insurgents, he led his Marines in three separate successful assaults on an enemy position. For his actions that day, he was awarded the Silver Star Medal, one of the Marine Corps' highest awards for conspicuous gallantry, third only to the Medal of Honor and the Navy Cross.

Four years later, Von Kraus finds himself back in Anbar province, but this time he's winning the war without firing a shot. He has once again come to the forefront of operations as the creator of "Operation Iraqi Pen Pal", a letter exchange program bridging the gap between the young students of the local Iraqi schools here, and students of Boston and Maine public schools in the United States.

Operation Iraqi Pen Pal recently completed its first transfer of more than 70 letters from Iraqi children to multiple U.S. schools, who in turn provided more than 100 responses that were handed out to Iraqi children by Von Kraus himself.

"The Americans, all they see is bad news; bombs, crimes, all of this," said the 29-year-old Boston native, standing amongst a throng of local youth while he handed out another batch of American letters. "With the pen pals, American kids can talk to Iraqi kids and see the reality of the good stuff and see how similar they really are to the children over here in Iraq. I'm sure we all have common misconceptions and I hope this can clear some of that up."

The program's initial stages started late September with just a couple of e-mails and some help from his family, said Von Kraus.

"I got the idea from the adjutant, who was starting a similar project," he said. "I also got an e-mail from my mother the same day. So, I started e-mailing some schools back home and my mother started working the network down there, getting in contact with schools."

Eventually the program proved to be a popular idea in the United States and it was put on a type of Boston public schools bulletin. People started calling Von Kraus, asking how they can get involved. Since then, the letters continued to flow in from the states.

According to Jasam Mouhame Idan, the Assistant Manager of the Arfwan girls' school here, he couldn't be happier.

"This is the first time I have heard of a program like this, and it is great," said the tall, Habbaniyah native. "And it is a very good idea because these students can make friends in the United States and other countries, and it lets them know that we are not bad people. We are good. We like this idea because we see that your people want to know what is going on in our country."

“One cool thing about when the Iraqi kids get these letters and post cards is they realized that they are noticed by American kids and they write back with their own letters and photos,” said Von Kraus. “I think these kids have no idea what to make of it. There are photos of American girls playing soccer and having class and doing everything together with the guys. There are pictures of the kids sledding, skiing, going to the movies, swimming and some of this blows the Iraqi kid’s minds. The stuff we take for granted, they don’t get to do over here in Iraq, but I think Iraqi kids respond really well to the letters.”

There has been a great resurgence of local security, safety and progress in this area once dubbed the “wild west” of Iraq. This security has allowed Iraqis to begin training as Iraqi security personnel, which allows other Iraqis to go about their lives and start rebuilding their country in a safe environment.

“It is amazing how many Iraqis you see out here taking charge now, which allows us to do great stuff like this.”

The program is a great success, said Idan, and for more than one reason.

“I also think that when kids see the U.S. forces, some wave, but some are scared,” he said. “It’s going to also help kids understand more about the Marines, because some of them have heard bad things from insurgents, who have said the American forces are bad guys. I think this program will let them know how Americans really are.”

“I really think it is good for both countries and hopefully we can make this possible across every unit here in Anbar,” said Von Kraus. “I hope to pass it up to the Regimental Combat Team level and push it out to other battalions and out to as many schools as possible. I would love to see them carry this one and I think it will be good if they do.”

(Story by Cpl. Bryce C.K. Muhlenberg, 1st Marine Division)