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Simunek leading holiday drive for vets

■ Bring items to Plain Talk office



By Travis Gulbrandson travis.gulbrandson@plaintal k.net

One USD student is doing her part to ensure that homeless South Dakota veterans have a happy holiday season.

Miss South Dakota candidate Autumn Simunek, a sophomore majoring in music education, is heading up a drive to collect items those veterans and their families for when they gain a permanent residence.

"In the Miss South Dakota program, we all have personal platforms, and mine is 'Serving Those Who Served," Simunek said. "I do a lot of volunteering for veterans and advocating for them, being their voice when they can't have one."

The drive began on Dec. 1 and will continue through Dec. 13, with the Plain Talk office acting as local dropoff point.

The donations will be taken to the Veterans Outreach office in Sioux Falls, and will be distributed to veterans from there.

Among the items being sought for donation are towels, single-bed sheets, shower curtains, alarm clocks, hygiene products, four-person flatware sets, gift cards and household items, as well as winter

coats, gloves and hats.

"The drive is just collecting necessities they need," Simunek said. "I think (the drive) is especially appropriate, given that Christmas is coming up and these are things they probably would really appreciate having."

Simunek said she does not have a specific goal in mind in terms of the number of donations received.

"This is the first drive that I'll be doing with (household) items instead of food, so right now I don't really know what to expect," she said. "I'm hoping to have a lot of items, but I'm not sure what I will be getting.

"I'm hoping for a lot of community involvement, for a lot of people to make a good turnout," she said.

Although it's still early in the drive, Simunek said she has received good responses from people who have heard about it.

"People do seem interested in wanting to help out," she said. "It's always positive feedback."

A native of Hot Springs, Simunek was fourth runner-up for Miss South Dakota in 2011 and second runner-up in 2012. She also is a longterm student volunteer at the VA Black Hills Health Care System.

Advocating for veterans is something she plans to make a lifetime pursuit, she said.

"My grandfather was a veteran, my great-grandfather was a veteran, I have two cousins who are currently serving, as well," she said. "I believe every citizen needs to get involved."

Simunek said she hopes other feel the same way.

"I'm just hoping for a great turnout and for a lot of community involvement," she said. "I hope everybody understands it's a really good cause and will help families in need."

USD grad discusses Afghanistan successes

By Derek Bartos

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VERMILLION — "Nothing comes easy to the counterinsurgent."

That was the message of U.S. Army Capt. Christopher L. Mercado, a 2004 distinguished military graduate of the University of South Dakota, who spoke Nov. 28 at USD's Farber Hall about his experience combating insurgency in Afghanistan. Mercado was the company commander of the Bushmaster Company, 2nd Battalion, 18th Infantry Regiment during its counterinsurgency effort from February 2011 to February of this year in the Imam Sahib and Dast-e Archi districts of the Kunduz

"Insurgency remains one of the most prevalent forms of conflict in the modern

world," he said. "Combating insurgency is very difficult business, and finding solutions to these ambiguous problems requires committed teams consisting of outstanding soldiers and leaders."

Mercado said his company's efforts began well before its deployment in February 2011, as the soldiers underwent six months of training in Europe to prepare for the mission. Not only did they train physically, but they also had to create a campaign that had a chance to be successful, he said.

"The campaign plan we designed was to influence the people of Imam Sahib and Dast-e Archi through engagement, to choose the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and Afghanistan's legitimate national security forces over the Taliban," he said.



The company determined that to do this, it had to create a partnership with the

Afghan Uniformed Police. "Together with the local police, we would combat

■ USD, Page 11

