

INJURED SOLDIER VISITS LINDEN SCHOOLS TO SAY "THANK YOU"

On February 16, 2010 the Linden Public Schools played host to a very special visitor: Corporal Joseph Whipple, United States Army. Corporal Whipple was injured in Iraq on April 1, 2009 when the vehicle he was traveling in flipped over after swerving to avoid a bomb in the roadway. He was ejected from the vehicle and the 8,000 lb gunners' turret came to rest on top of him. He sustained multiple severe injuries: 17 broken bones including both arms, both shoulders, his back in 6 places, a collapsed lung and severe head trauma. He awoke 9 days later at Walter Reed Military Hospital in an amputee ward where he was told that he would lose his right arm. It was at this point that the story began to make its way to Linden.

Grant Gutkowski, a Linden resident, former teacher's aide and Linden NJ ROTC Cadet was a 1st Lieutenant in Corporal Whipple's unit in Iraq when he was injured. Lt. Gutkowski took an interest in the plight of his friend Corporal Whipple and his situation that he was in back in the United States. At this point it appeared as if Corporal Whipple would lose his arm and to add insult to injury, the Army classified the incident as an accident since the bomb did not go off therefore Corporal Whipple was informed that he would not receive a Purple Heart or Merit Award of any kind. With his spirits down and more surgeries in front of him, Corporal Whipple was a soldier in need of support. Lt. Gutkowski began to send emails to his brother Burke here in Linden to ask if there was anything that could be done to help Corporal Whipple. Burke is an owner of The Fig Leaf Insurance Agency along with Benjamin Sheedy and Linden Board of Education Member Bryan Tomko. Bryan shared the emails and the request for help with Linden Board of Education Superintendent Dr. Rocco Tomazic in the hopes that maybe a class or a school could adopt this injured soldier and produce some letters of support and encouragement.

Dr. Tomazic, who knows Grant Gutkowski

from his days as Commander of the Linden ROTC program, took this plight very seriously and responded in a big way. Dr. Tomazic brought this situation to the entire district: principals, teachers and students; and asked each school to do what it could to help a soldier in need. The Linden School District did just that. With a sense of community, patriotism and gratitude for our veterans, our schools and our children flooded Corporal Whipple with boxes of candy, notes, stories, drawings, and most importantly special words of encouragement written in their own hand.

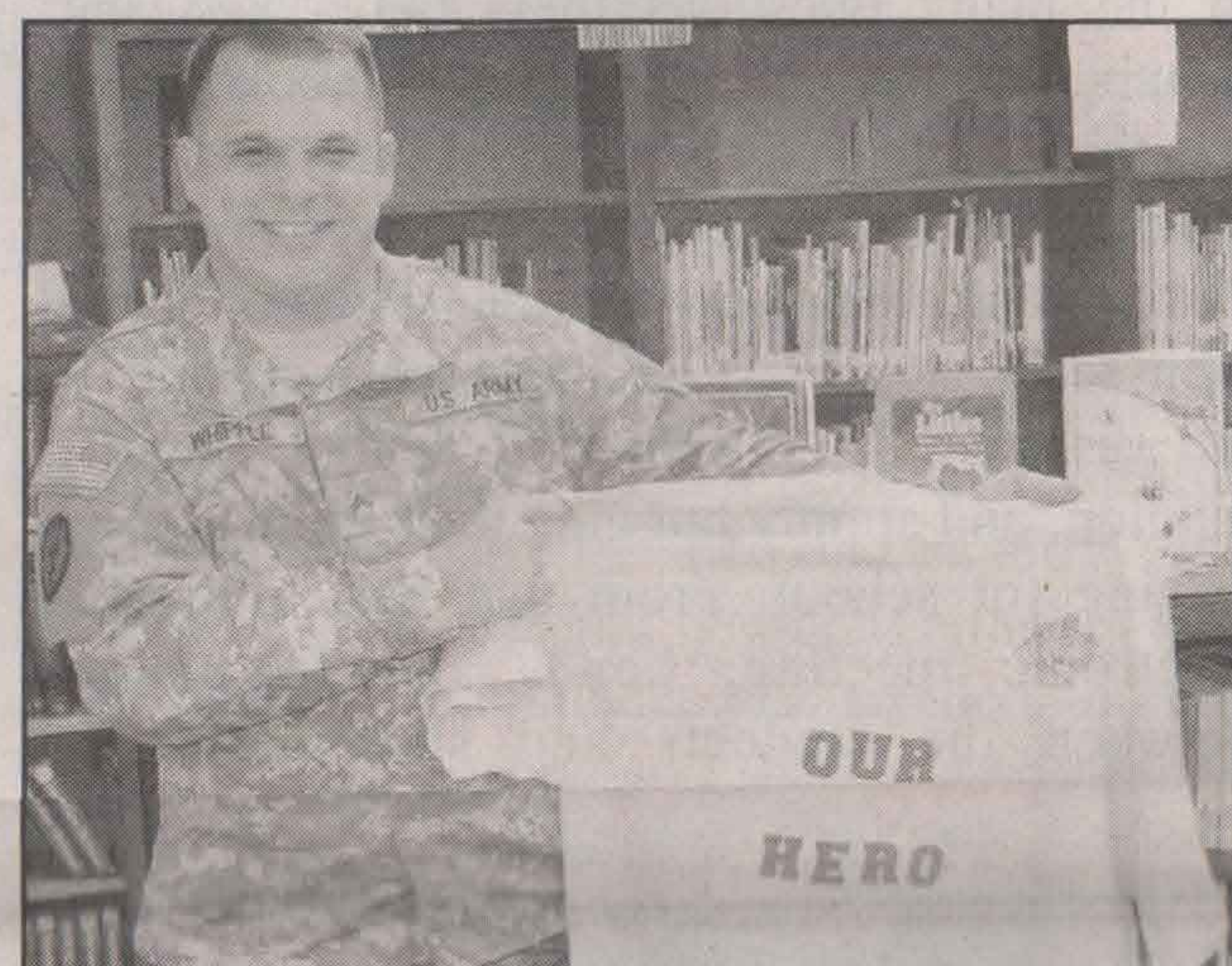
Corporal Whipple was very deeply touched by this outpouring of support and kindness and made known his intention to come to Linden and personally thank the students for helping him heal. He arrived in Linden and spent February 16th, 17th and 18th touring all Linden Schools and being received by the students. He was introduced to Linden City Council on February 16th and honored by the Board of Education on February 17th. Corporal Joseph Whipple made good on his promise to come and personally

thank the students and the City of Linden for being there for him and supporting him in his moment of need. In his words, he wanted to personally place the exclamation point at the end of this story. "Having the opportunity to come personally and be a face to the name and let these kids know just how much it meant to me; that was special for me. I wanted to show the kids that the people they write letters to are real and that they do appreciate what the kids do and please keep it up. I have thousands of brothers and sisters still over there that could use some of the same support and encouragement that I received."

As of March 1st, Cpl. Whipple is to be promoted to Sergeant. While doctors were able to save his right arm with about 30% functionality, he is now waiting for his eleventh surgery later this month to remove some plates and try to repair some nerve damage. The scars are real, the pain is real and the people who fight for us are real. The love and support that our community and our students have shown is equally as real and we should all be proud to be a part of that.



(above, l-r) The 3rd grade students of School No. 1 are holding the flag that Corporal Whipple sent to the school are Gilbert Nolasco, Damian Martins, Britney Jean, William Pierre, Elijah Cenatus and Teacher Dina Silverman.



(above) Corporal Whipple displays the shirt that the students of School No. 2 gave him.



(above) School No. 6 pre-k students Isabel Andrade and Ulises Cardoso present gifts.



(above) School No.6, 5th grade student Cathy Zawistowski salutes Corporal Whipple.



(above) Linden HS NJROTC cadet Michael Tisdall is promoted to Seaman, by Corporal Whipple as Aaron & Arkeese Thomas look on.