

STAFF PHOTOS: JOE McLAUGHLIN

Students at Linden School No. 1 carry the American flag at the school's assembly, when Cpl. Joseph Whipple of Columbia, S.C., stopped by to thank them for cards, letters and gifts they sent to him in Iraq.

# Iraq veteran gives thanks for support

## Soldier injured in line of duty visits Linden schools

By **LEO D. ROMMEL**  
STAFF WRITER

**LINDEN** — Cpl. Joseph Whipple stood in front of hundreds of children at School No. 1, raved about how much candy they had sent him, then patted his belly and smiled.

"As you can see, I've eaten it and enjoyed it," the 32-year-old said.

Whipple, a resident of South Carolina, visited children at three Linden schools Tuesday to personally thank them for the many cards, letters and gifts they sent to cheer him up after he was injured while serving in Iraq.

On Tuesday, he first visited School No. 1 on North Wood Avenue, then School No. 2 on South Wood Avenue and School No. 4 on Dill Avenue.

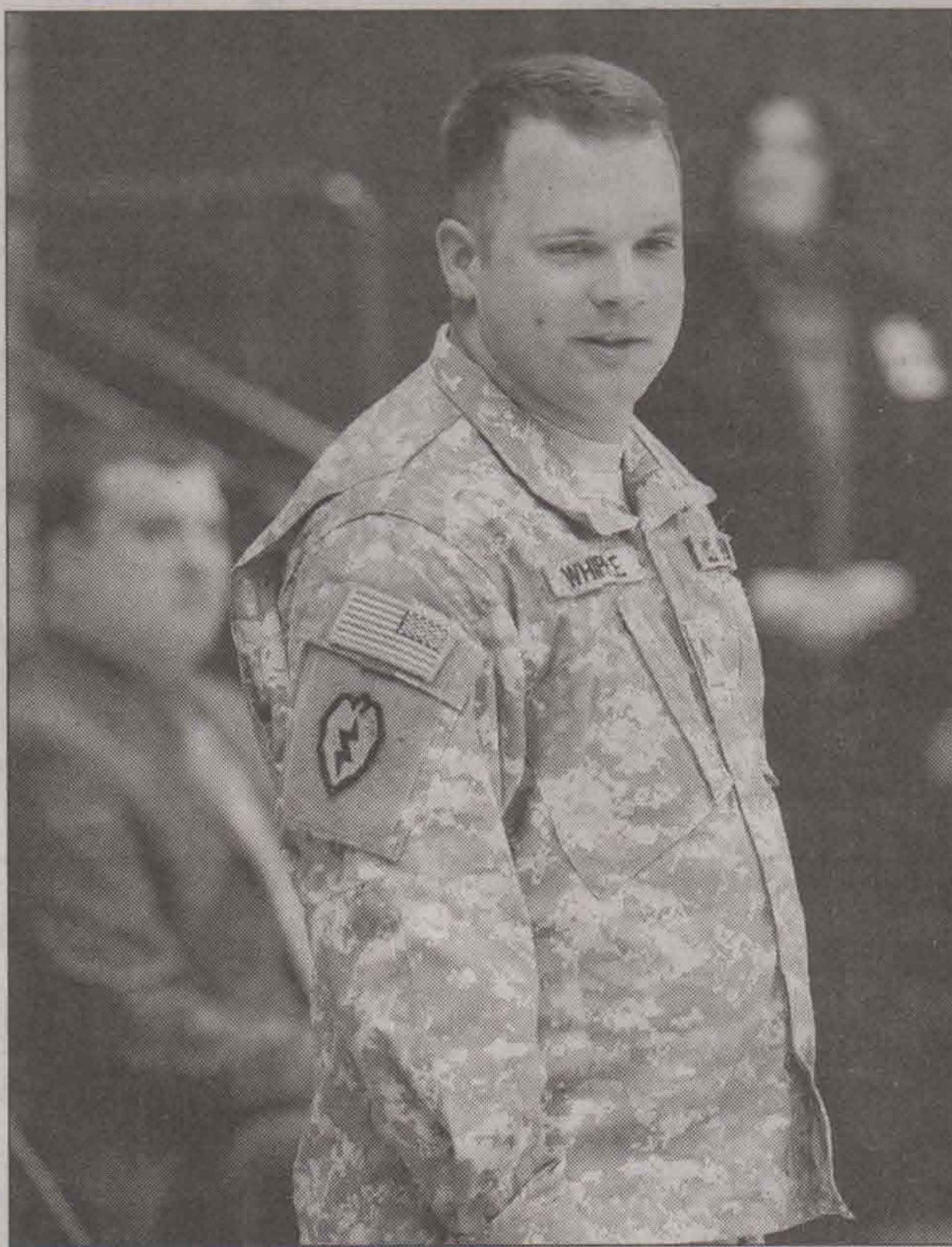
Whipple is likely to visit all 11 schools in the district by Thursday, Superintendent Rocco Tomazic said. All district schools helped with donations, he said.

Whipple said the gifts he received from the pupils in Linden were "overwhelming."

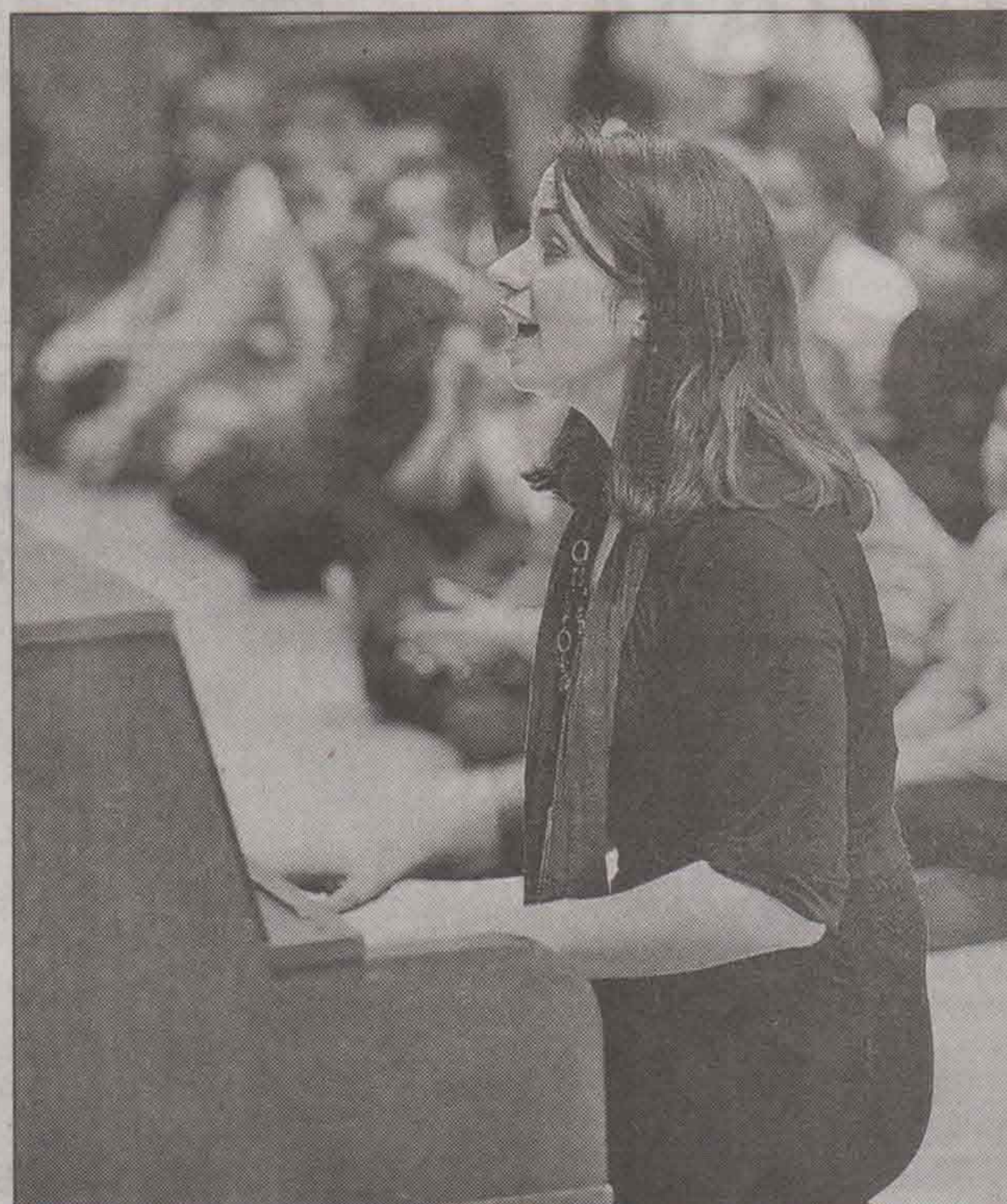
"There are a lot of us who receive packages who never get a chance to come back and see the faces of those who gave the gifts," Whipple told about 360 pupils at School No. 1. "So, it's a privilege and an honor for me to do that today."

During the approximately half-hour assembly at School No. 1, pupils saluted a flag Whipple donated to the school. Children also read poems and sang songs.

Whipple suffered many injuries in Iraq on April 1, 2009, when the armored vehicle he was riding in swerved to avoid a device that appeared to be a roadside bomb.



Above: Whipple appears at Linden School No. 1's assembly. Below: Music teacher Meghan Page plays the piano as she directs the School No. 1 All-City Chorus.



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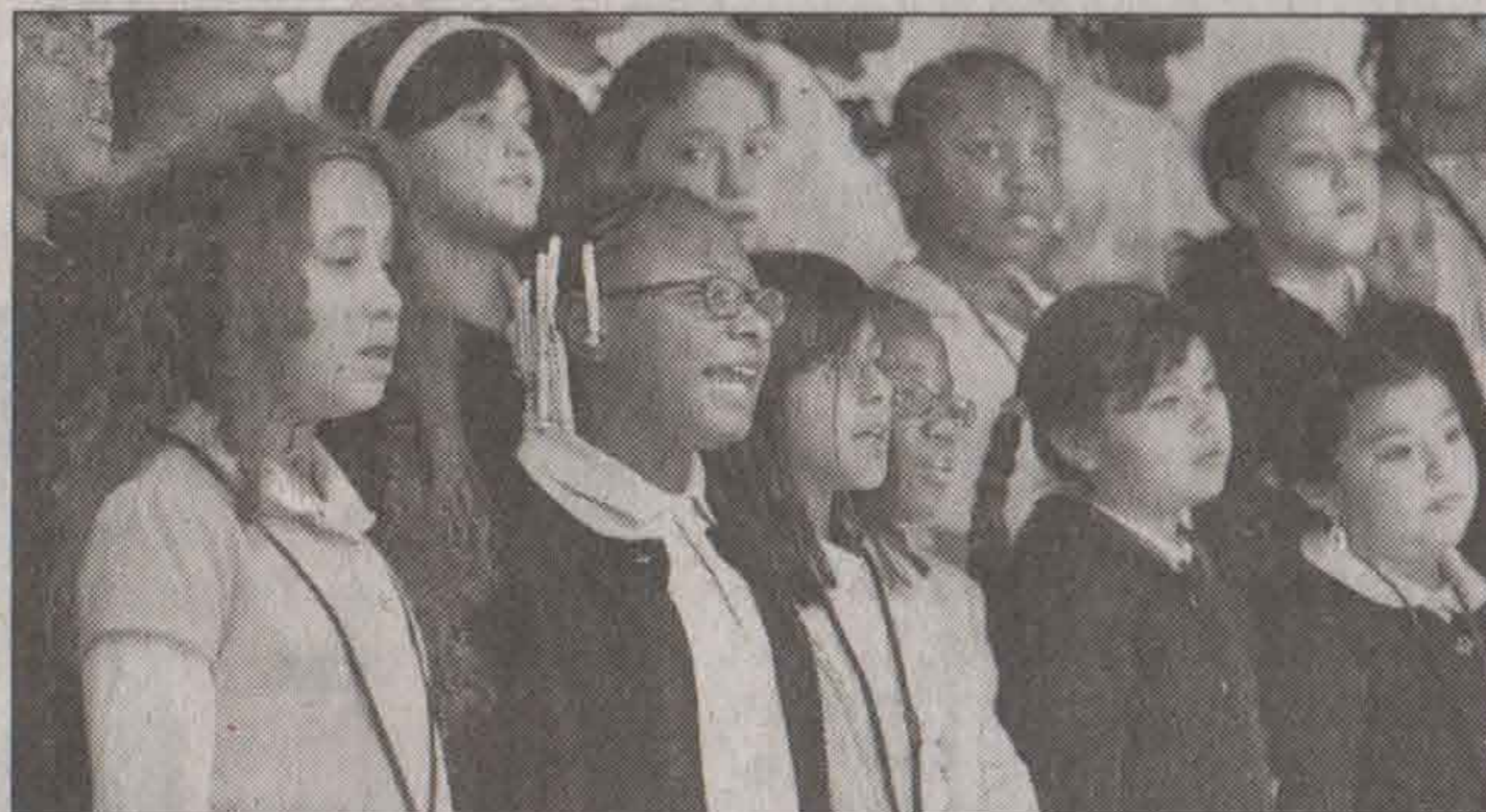
# Support

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The vehicle flipped several times, ejecting Whipple, and a part of the vehicle rolled on top of him.

Whipple broke bones in his arms, shoulder and shoulder blades, as well as ribs and six vertebrae, and he suffered a severe concussion. He was instantly knocked out from the accident, he said, and awoke nine days later at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C.

Grant Gutowski, a former Linden High School ROTC cadet who is now a second lieutenant in the Army, was with Whipple when he was injured.



STAFF PHOTOS: JOE McLAUGHLIN

**Students at Linden School No. 1 greet Cpl. Joseph Whipple of Columbia, S.C., who stopped by to thank them for cards, letters and gifts they sent to him in Iraq.**

According to Whipple, Gutowski told his brother of Whipple's injuries. Gutowski's brother is business partners with Bryan Tomko, a member of the Linden Board of Education. Once the district was told of the accident, students began

sending Whipple notes and gifts before the holidays.

Linden School No. 1 started the initiative, Principal Dona Preston said. The school's K-Kids group, a youth service organization affiliated with the Linden Kiwanis Club, collected

more than \$400 in donations and about 180 pounds of Halloween candy from the end of October to Veterans Day in November.

"At that point, we knew Cpl. Whipple couldn't eat all the candy, so we reached out to the (city's) Veteran Association and they said they could make a connection to also get this candy on

the (warship) USS New York," Preston said.

As a result, Preston said, half the candy went to Whipple and the other half went to the USS New York.

Chanell Becton, one of the kids who read a poem aloud at the School No. 1 assembly, said she was amazed by Whipple's visit.

"It's actually special be-

cause not a lot of people do what he did," the 11-year-old fifth-grader said. "Not a lot of people take the time to come out to the schools and thank them for what they've done. It was pretty nice of him."

*Leo D. Rommel:  
732-565-7296; lrommel@  
MyCentralJersey.com*

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