

0 Comments

- [Print](#)
- [Reprint or License](#)
- [Share](#)

## Marine, students inspire each other

**After corresponding with St. Patrick students while in Afghanistan, Chris Nagel tells them how much their support meant to him and others.**

[Like](#) Be the first of your friends to like this.

By Michael J. Solender  
Special Correspondent  
Posted: Sunday, Feb. 06, 2011  
Slideshow

[« Prev](#) 1 of 2 [Next »](#)



Marine 1st. Lt. Chris Nagel wrote an inspirational letter to the students of St. Patrick Catholic School last month. On Monday, he spoke to about 300 students, faculty and parents at an assembly. PHOTOS BY John D. Simmons - [jsimmons@charlotteobserver.com](mailto:jsimmons@charlotteobserver.com)

[Buy Photo](#) | [Store](#)



Nagel takes an answer about "What is patriotism?" from second-grader Maggie Sizeland.

Though he was several continents away, serving with the U.S. Marine Corps in Afghanistan last year, 1st Lt. Chris Nagel's adopted hometown of Charlotte and his elementary school, St. Patrick Catholic, were never far from his thoughts.

Nagel, who serves as a battalion staff officer with the 3rd Combat Engineer Battalion, returned to his elementary alma mater on Monday as the keynote speaker, helping kick off Catholic Schools Week 2011.

The student body and staff at St. Patrick have embraced Nagel as their own, representing a personal face of the military personnel serving at home and abroad.

Nearly 300 kindergarten through fifth-grade students listened to Nagel answer questions about what it is like to be a Marine stationed in Afghanistan.

"In some ways it's almost like being a kid," Nagel said. "We get to be with our friends, we're outside a great deal exploring, and we get to go into the woods with our dogs.

"We sleep in big tents, with 15 or so of our friends; it's almost like a big sleepover - every day of the week. We always keep (it) that is to protect all the freedoms we enjoy here at home in the U.S."

Nagel seemed right at home with the students, whose curiosity led them to ask about his sleeping conditions:

Did he sleep in a bunk bed? Yes.

Does he get homesick? Yes, but the students' letters, prayers and packages made all the difference.

The visit to the Dilworth school was a follow-up to a letter Nagel sent the students just before the Christmas holiday. In it, he responded to the support the school showed his battalion by sending boxes loaded with personal-care products, games, books, energy drinks, magazines, candy, cards and prayers for him and his fellow Marines.

According to Nagel, who currently is stationed in Twentynine Palms, Calif., the care packages were coveted not only for their usefulness but for their inspirational message.

"On numerous occasions the personalized letters and cards would be passed around and taken on missions for a quick reminder of why we were there," said Nagel.

"Favorite cards amongst the stack of many would end up taped to a Marine's rack, acting as a quick pick-me-up on a bad day. ... These customized notes made the deployment bearable."

In his letter, Nagel acknowledged how much the support of the students meant to him.

"As I sit here at Camp Leatherneck, Afghanistan, awaiting my flight home," he wrote, "the dominating thought that continues to enter my mind is the amount of support and prayers that were given to me by the students of St. Patrick.

"The prayers that you provided did not go unanswered; God answered them for us on a daily basis. The prayers undoubtedly saved the lives of military members fighting for the freedom of America and because of you; they are now able to re-unite with their families."

In addition to the letter, Nagel presented the school an American flag that was flown over the Regional Command (Southwest) Helmand Province, Afghanistan.

"This flag represents the beautiful freedoms that the United States has earned through the ultimate sacrifice given by your friends in the military," he wrote. "We will forever watch over you and protect our country from tyranny, providing a safe home for you to learn and grow."

Principal Debbie Mixer said she was delighted to have Nagel speak to the students about responsibilities and help them see firsthand the wonderful things they can accomplish by dreaming big and putting their hearts and minds into achieving their goals.

When Nagel was home on leave last winter, he spoke personally to the school and thanked parents of the student body at an evening Christmas Show.

Michael Smith, who has children who attend the school, went to the Christmas event.

"Here is a young man, a hero, actually, serving in Afghanistan, facing incredible conflict and using his experience as a teaching moment for children," said Smith.

"Christopher demonstrates so much promise and integrity. He truly has a servant heart and is able to connect with children through his experience and by example. He is a throwback to the generation of my grandparents in the way he understands and exemplifies the importance of service. It is very intentional and speaks to his character."

Nagel's connection to the school goes beyond his own years as a student there. His mother, Linda Nagel, has been a teacher at the school for the past 14 years.

"The school has a long tradition of honoring our service personnel," said Linda Nagel, "We have sent cards and letters to overseas military personnel for years, typically at the holidays."

Teacher Michele Llana's second-grade class started saying "God Bless Christopher Nagel" as their way of putting a personal face with their prayers, she said. "It was really touching."

All the attention is inspiring to Nagel, he said.

"Following my presentation of the gift to the school, I began receiving numerous phone calls and e-mails from parents wanting to help my job search and transition into business. I'm grateful for their support and humbled by the maturity and care exemplified by their children," he said.

"I'm thankful for the students; they will forever hold a place in my heart. "From the response he received Monday, it is abundantly clear he holds a place in theirs as well.

Michael J. Solender is a freelance writer.



Subscribe to The Charlotte Observer.

Like Be the first of your friends to like this.

HIDE COMMENTS

This affects comments on all stories.

Cancel Ok

The Charlotte Observer welcomes your comments on news of the day. The more voices engaged in conversation, the better for us all, but do keep it civil. Please refrain from profanity, obscenity, spam, name-calling or attacking others for their views. [Read more](#)

Add New Comment



@mjsolender

8 comments 7 likes received

Type your comment here.

Share on

Post as @mjsolender

Showing 0 comments

Sort by [Newest first](#) [Subscribe by email](#) [Subscribe by RSS](#)

Real-time updating is **enabled**. [\(Pause\)](#)