Students to donate piñata to northern Japan school children

By Mark Elrod, CFAY Public Affairs

Students of the Spanish Emersion class here at The Sullivans Elementary School, recently created a piñata crane in preparation for observation of Cinco de Mayo, which is a celebration of the Battle of Puebla on May 5, 1862, when 4,500 Mexican forces faced 6,000 well-trained French soldiers.

"We made a total of 18 piñatas, one for each class," said Foreign Language in Elementary School (FLES) Teacher Laura Bautista, who teaches Spanish to Sullivans Kindergarten and first-grade students.

In some ways piñatas may symbolize charity, because with its eventual breaking, everyone can share in its contents.

Traditionally, piñatas are filled with both candies and fruits. However, the crane piñata is different from the others, for it is not filled with candy and fruits, it is filled with small origami cranes with messages and wishes of hope and good luck written on them.

The idea materialized while Bautista was reading a book entitled "*El Piñatero*" (The Piñata Maker) to her students, they asked her if they could make other shapes other than the traditional star shapes.

So, Bautista and her students looked through the book for different shaped piñatas and they came across a swan shaped one, which some of her half Japanese students identified with as a suru, or crane.

For some, the crane, or specifically the origami crane, is a symbol of peace. Japanese legend states that anyone who folds 1,000 paper cranes will have their heart's desire come true.

So, Bautista and a class of six students worked together for approximately a week to make the crane. They even made a heart for the crane out of an adorned, pink balloon. The students decided to decorate the outside of the crane with the colors white and red, because they are those of the Japanese flag.

Foreign Language in Elemetary School teacher Laura Bautista and her Sullivans school kindergarten students make a heart out of a balloon to inset inside a piñata crane, which is to be donated, along with school supplies, clothing and candy, to Japanese school children in northern Japan, who have been affected by the March 11 earthquake and tsunami.

Photo courtesy of Laura Bautista

After the children expressed that they didn't want to break the piñata, it was decided it would not be filled with traditional contents.

According to Bautista, one of the school liaisons heard of the crane piñata, and suggested donating it to a school affected by the recent events in northern Japan.

Since the piñata wasn't going to be filled with candy and fruits, the students decided to make origami cranes and write good wishes for the children who might receive the crane.

Hannah Yie, who is one of Bautista's kindergarten students, said the message for the children that she wrote on her origami crane read, "Work together and don't give up."

Yie also, expressed she would like to tell the children, "Have fun in school and learn so much."

In addition to the crane piñata, boxes of school supplies, clothing and candy will be donated to Japanese children in need.

Laughter plays role in stress relief say military health experts

By Sandra Abrams, Military Health Systems

Whether it is a giggle, a chuckle or a loud belly laugh, laughter is good medicine and plays a vital role in military fitness and readiness. For service members in the field or at home, having a good laugh is a great way to bring about a positive physical and emotional response to one's overall well being.

Capt. Scott L. Johnston, interim director of the San Diego, Calif.-based Naval Center for Combat & Operational Stress Control (NCCOSC) said laughter offers a way to relieve pressure.

"Our military right now is stressed. There are a lot of things going on and we have lots of different competing missions. Every way and anyway that we can deal with combating that stress improves our readiness," Johnston said. "Laughter is a nice easy way to do that."

Johnston, trained as a clinical psychologist, has firsthand knowledge about combat stress. He has been deployed five times since his commission in 1993. Being in the field is a very stressful situation, everyone's adrenal is rushing. He gives some insight into his experiences with Marine infantry units while in Iraq on patrol.

"We had to be on guard and we had our whole body geared up to deal with the enemy. And that is an appropriate response," Johnston said. "But if you keep that going, and keep that energy inside your body for a long time, that can have significant negative effects on a lot of different things including your mental health."

To deal with all that stress response, Johnson said the Marines turned to humor once they were back in a safe environment.

"That was a great positive effect of that release of some of that negative energy," Johnston said. "I found that laughter also built cohesion within the group. They could share some of those stories and they could connect with those around them."

The study of laughter and its psychological and physiological effects has a scientific name, gelotology, and is an important part of relieving stress. Places such as the Mayo Clinic have done studies on the importance of laughter to a person's mental and physical health.

To illustrate this point, Johnston explains laughter has positive impact on a person's organs, decreases blood pressure and can increase one's immune response.

Recently, Adm. Mike Mullen and his wife, Deborah, hosted the USO holiday tour that stopped at a number of military bases in the Gulf region to entertain or visit service members in military hospitals with several comedians: Robin Williams, Kathleen Madigan and Lewis Black, plus other celebrities. The events lifted the spirit of the troops and created an important break from the stress.

To maintain that positive feeling, certain triggers can help as well, suggests Johnston.

"First, a picture of a funny thing you went through, a comic strip that you really enjoy or the daily calendar that has the little jokes on it. Having the triggers to remind you to laugh can be very helpful," Johnston said. "Second, laugh with others. Be around other people you enjoy. It can be very contagious."

He also recommends the idea of fake it until you make it. So even if you do not feel like laughing, you do not feel like smiling, making yourself do so is beneficial.

For those service members or families going through a tough time, and not ready to share a smile or share in a joke, it can be difficult. Johnston recommends getting help if someone is in a prolonged stressful situation.