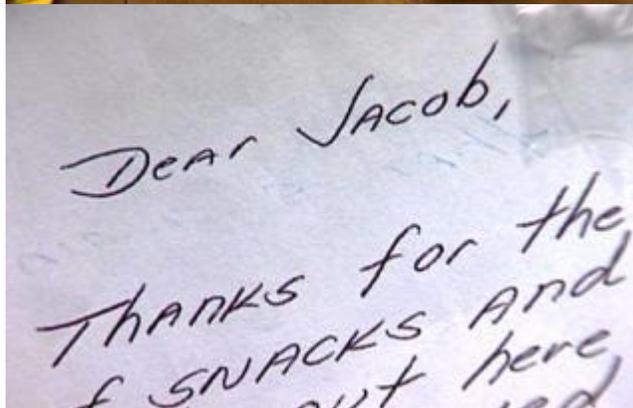


## A long-distance change of life

written by: Dave Delozier  
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DILLON - We often think that the people closest to us make the biggest differences in our lives. Nora Hall and her son Jacob have learned the complete opposite is sometimes true.

Eight months ago, Hall was struggling to find a way to motivate Jacob to read and write.

"When he started third grade, I was informed he was no where near a third grade student," Hall said.

Those were painful words for a mother to hear. She knew she had to find an answer.

Jacob had always had an interest in playing soldier, so when someone suggested getting him involved in a pen pal program for military personnel serving overseas, it seemed like something worth trying.

"Jacob is so passionate about some things and one of them is the army," Hall said.

Nora signed Jacob up through the Adopt a U.S. Soldier program. Jacob was matched with Gunnery Sergeant Baltazar Pineda, a U.S. Marine serving in Iraq.

When Jacob sat down to write that first letter, Hall knew it wasn't going to be easy.

"At first when we sat down to write a letter, he did struggle to write a couple of sentences. He said he liked gym, lunch and recess," remembered Hall of that first letter.

They mailed that letter off and waited.

"We didn't know for sure how it was going to work out. We didn't know for sure if the soldier would even write back," Hall said. "I just desperately wanted something to help my son."

She found that in the letter Gunnery Sergeant Pineda sent to Jacob.

"It was wonderful. It was to my child. It was to his level. And it told him it was important to learn to read and write," Hall said.

The change in Jacob was immediate. He sat right down and started to write a reply to his new friend.

"And he told me, 'We have to write on this entire piece of paper, the whole paper,' and I said, 'You got it,'" Hall said.

In the months since, Jacob and Pineda have exchanged letters and e-mails almost weekly. The simple practice of writing the letters he sent, and reading the ones he received, has changed Jacob as a student.

"He did excellent in school this year," Hall said. "He got a lot of E's (for excellent) and now he'll even pick up a book and read it on his own."

The change has also been felt throughout Jacob's school, Summit Cove Elementary in Dillon. His classmates saw the joy Jacob was getting out of the program and started to ask questions.

"They thought it was really cool," Hall said. "And so they started asking, 'How do you do this?'"

Now, more than 100 of Jacob's classmates and Boy Scout troop members have adopted soldiers.

The only thing that remained was for a little boy from Dillon and the Marine who had changed his life to meet. That finally happened.

Pineda, home from his deployment in Iraq, flew to Denver and met Jacob at Denver International Airport. Pineda, along with his wife and two children, will spend the weekend in Summit County visiting with Jacob and his family.

It gives Gunnery Sergeant Pineda a chance to see firsthand the difference he made in Jacob's life. "It was overwhelming. You know I didn't think that a couple of words to a young person could do so much for him," says Gunnery Sergeant Pineda. "I was really proud of him."

While the pen pal program made a big difference for Jacob, it also benefitted Pineda.

"Just seeing how he was doing kind of took my mind off of what I was doing, at least temporarily," Pineda said.

Since Pineda's return from Iraq, Jacob has continued to keep in contact with him through e-mail. But with so many of troops still deployed, Jacob decided to adopt another soldier.

Jacob has learned first-hand the big difference you can make in someone's life, even from a great distance.

For more information on the Adopt a U.S. Soldier program, visit [www.adoptausoldier.org](http://www.adoptausoldier.org).

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