

BRINGING OUR TROOPS CLOSER TO THEIR FAMILIES

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Staff Writer

LEESBURG — A soldier said nothing beats calling home and hearing his daughter talk about cheerleading and his wife discuss problems with the laundry machine. Just hearing their voices makes him feel closer to home.

That's the aim of an annual drive to collect unused cell phones, sell them and use that

money to buy phone cards for American troops to call loved ones.

Until this year, the phone cards could only be used by troops in war zones, Lady Lake police Chief Ed Nathanson said. Now, the cards can be used by troops in health-care facilities who are going through rehabilitation, he

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Marine Corps League members Russ Graser, left, Commander Fred Whitehurst and Jim Hurtzinger help to collect cell phones during the Help Our Heroes Call Home motorcycle ride on Saturday at Gator Harley in Leesburg.

VICTORIA ALDRICH / DAILY COMMERCIAL

PHONES

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said.

After three years of spearheading the local campaign, Nathanson has collected about 20,000 cell phones.

On Saturday, the drive for more phones continued with the third anniversary of "Help

Our Heroes Call Home." Members of American Legion Post 347 in Lady Lake rode motorcycles from Lady Lake to Gator Harley Davidson in Leesburg, led by an escort provided by the Lake County Sheriff's Office.

Nathanson said he hoped to collect as many as 2,000 phones on Saturday alone.

"The ride is symbolic," he said. Nathanson initiated the "Help Our Heroes Call Home" campaign locally.

Lady Lake businessman Chris Gehman said he used to run a Verizon store locally, and joined the effort because "this gets to better use."

Those who missed Saturday's event may still drop off unwanted cell phones at the Lake County Department of Public Works, 437 Ardice Ave. in Eustis.

Other cell phone drop-off locations include American Legion Post 347, Gator Harley-Davidson, Stormy Hill Harley-Davidson in Clermont, Law Offices of Brent C. Miller in Clermont, Tavares, Inverness and The Villages, Lake County Sheriff's Office and local law enforcement agencies.

Since implementing the program locally three years ago, the Lady Lake Police Department and other local partners have helped raise more than 1 million prepaid calling minutes for our troops.