

What started out as a single gift to their son in Iraq soon turned into a national non-profit organization for Steve and Barb Baker. Now, Fergus Falls-based Operation Happy Note, which sends musical instruments to soldiers overseas, is hitting a new turning point in its four-year history. They've got a former child star on board to help get the word out.

Allison Balson, who previously played the role as "Nancy" Oleson on Little House on the Prairie, is in the process of launching her music career. And she's using the national spotlight to tie in the importance of Operation Happy Note.

Balson's love for music played only partially into her desire to help out with the organization. Having been raised an "Army brat," Balson understands the importance the military plays within this country.

In a letter written to Steve and Barb Baker, Balson wrote, "I truly support your passion for music and in sharing musical instruments with our troops overseas. It is a vital form of emotional release and generates calm, happiness and joy for our men and women in the armed forces."

As of now, Operation Happy Note has sent out \$2,600 worth of instruments to troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. Their office is backed up with 1,475 e-mails from soldiers requesting instruments. Steve Baker said they know they could meet everyone's needs, but it's going to take a lot of money, which he and his wife can't possibly come up with on their own.

To ship out all the instruments stored in the back of their Fergus Falls music store, it would take around \$35,000. That's where Balson comes in.

"She's going to put the word in everyone's ears," Steve Baker said.

The Bakers are hoping that will help move the process along, allowing them to answer the requests of the thousands of soldiers who are looking for something to help them through their struggles.

Steve Baker, a Vietnam Veteran, understands the healing power of music and the opportunities it creates for the young soldiers to escape the troubles they face day in and day out.

"It allows them to just shut down for a while," Steve Baker said.

Balson, along with creative partner, "Stone," recently released an album titled, "Allison and Stone," and are committed to donating 10 percent of the album's profits to Operation Happy Note.

For more information on how to help out with Operation Happy Note, visit the Web site at, www.operationhappynote.com.