

## Greeks pay tribute to U.S. soldiers



LYDIA FISER/Special to The Sun

Nick Baragona paints a ribbon-shaped piece of wood, to be displayed in front of fraternity and sorority houses at UF, in honor of kidnapped former UF student Jonathon Cote.

By LYDIA FISER  
Special to The Sun

Back in late 2006, Jonathon Cote wrote an e-mail to a fraternity brother at the University of Florida saying he was coming home from Iraq and wanted to live in the Sigma Phi Epsilon house with his brothers starting in January 2007.

He never made it back to Gainesville.

Two weeks after that e-mail, news broke that five Americans had been kidnapped in Iraq. When Dane Eagle, Cote's big brother in the fraternity, found out that Cote was one of those five, he was devastated.

"You feel helpless," he said.

The brothers of Sigma Phi Epsilon and UF's Interfraternity Council wanted to raise awareness and show their support to the Cote family and to all soldiers overseas, so they organized an event Saturday that brought together UF's Greek community for the cause.

More than 400 people representing most of the sororities and fraternities at UF joined Sig Ep at Lake Alice Field to paint large, wooden "support our troops" ribbons and to write letters to the Cote family, soldiers overseas and to the children of soldiers overseas. The ribbons will be displayed in front of fraternity and sorority houses starting today.

"We hope when people see the ribbons, they'll think of Jon," said Craig Thompson, president of the Interfraternity Council.

The letters written, along with letters from UF President Bernie Machen, Gov. Charlie Crist and the logbook of all the people who attended Saturday's event, will be sent to the Cote family along with flowers.

Under Saturday's hot sun amidst a sea of red Sigma Phi Epsilon T-shirts, men and women crouched on the ground with paintbrushes in hand to create visual reminders of Cote and American soldiers overseas.

While creating the ribbons, the brothers from Cote's pledge class reminisced about what a positive person Cote is.

He was really active in the house and always lifted the mood, said Ryan Moseley, who was president of Sigma Phi Epsilon during Cote's pledge year.

"It's hard when someone like him is taken away," he said.

Cote always had a smile on his face, and he led a lot of people, Eagle said.

Eagle, who is now an assistant to Crist, volunteered to bring the governor's letter to UF to be sent to the family with all the other letters because of his connection to Cote.

Cote served four years in the Army prior to attending UF, and it was hard on him knowing there were a lot of people still in Iraq, Eagle said.

He liked the action, and he was motivated to go back to Iraq and work another year, Moseley said. It was during this return trip to Iraq that Cote and four other employees of the contracting firm Crescent Security Group were kidnapped on Nov. 16, 2006.

"Our prayers are with him," Moseley said. "We hope when Cote comes back, he'll be right back in the mix."