

Tuesday, August 28, 2007 12:27 PM CDT

Tough day for peace activist

By JENS MANUEL KROGSTAD, Courier Staff Writer

WATERLOO --- It's 85 and muggy, there's no shade, and walkers and bicyclists pass by with little more than a glance.

Amethyst Polk, 23, a field organizer for Americans Against Escalation in Iraq, has set up shop on a grassy patch of land between Sen. Charles Grassley's office and a parking lot late Monday afternoon. The group has been pressuring Sen. Grassley and Rep. Tom Latham, both Iowa Republicans, to support a "safe and responsible end to the Iraq war."



JENS MANUEL KROGSTAD / Courier Staff Writer Stesh and Jacob Drilling, both 12, sign a petition advocating for the "safe and responsible end to the Iraq war" on Monday afternoon as Amethyst Polk, left, a field organizer for Americans Against Escalation in Iraq, looks on.

She'll only sign up a handful of people for a petition over two hours Monday afternoon. Iowans for Sensible Priorities promised to bring their pig-mobile, and they're nowhere in sight. To her relief, three people from Bill Richardson's campaign show up to keep her company --- at one point she thanks two of them for staying for most of the two hours.

"Hi guys! Would you like to sign a petition?" Polk asks a pair of women walking by.

"Nope," the blonde replies politely, but tersely.

Among the few to stop were Stesh and Jacob Drilling, both 12 and too young to be put on the mailing list they signed up for --- she made a note not to send them information after they left.

Stesh Drilling, who has a best friend with a dad serving in Iraq, says she signed up because she doesn't think the Iraqi people want American troops in the country anymore.

"I've been thinking they need to come home now. They've said they don't need us there anymore," she says.

It's not always this slow, Polk assures. She says she signs up dozens of people at campaign events, and even signed up a dozen at the Republican Straw Poll earlier this month. On days like these, she pulls out a postcard-sized scrap of cardboard from her boyfriend. The cardboard is from an MRE, short for Meals Ready to Eat, which is standard fare for American troops. On it, her boyfriend, Eric, who serves as an intelligence officer in the Marine Corps, scribbles that the brown postcard is titled "sandstorm in Iraq. It's a popular seller. Yesterday, the temp reached 122 degrees. That's hot, even if it's a 'dry heat.' I wish we were sitting in the air condition together. Love, Eric."

Polk declined to give his last name because she is outspoken in her opposition to the war.

But Polk traverses Iowa with his blessing. She moved from Tucson, Ariz., to Des Moines in June, because she was told Iowa is the place to advocate for an end to the Iraq war during campaign season.

When she fell in love with her boyfriend of 18 months, she never dreamed she would end up in Waterloo as an activist. Polk's eyes well up with tears when she says she had known Eric for a year before the military unexpectedly called him up for a fourth tour of duty in Iraq.

"It's really not fair to people. I have the utmost respect for wives and mothers (of troops)...it's so hard," she says.

Contact Jens Manuel Krogstad at (319) 291-1580 or jens.krogstad@wfcourier.com.